

Apparently it's My Fault That My Husband Has The Head of a Beast:

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MY FAULT
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THE HEAD OF A BEAST





CLAUDIO BALTZAR

Crown Prince of Baltzar. To Rosemarie he looks like a dashing, black-haired young man, but to everyone else—himself included—his head looks like a goat-horned Silver Lion. He is also a skilled soldier, specializing in swordplay, and hates showing his vulnerabilities to others.

ROSEMARIE VOLLAND

Princess of the nation of Volland. She possesses eyes that curse her with seeing any liars or those with negative emotions as having the heads of beasts. Because of that, she has trust issues and a weak character, leading to her currently living as a shut-in in the royal palace. Gardening is her favorite pastime, and she often gives names to her gardening tools and plants.

She loves drinking tea made from Kaola seeds.

Apparently it's
MY FAULT
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characters



HEIDI SCHNEIDT

Rosemarie's maid, possessed of a pure and innocent personality. Positively worships Rosemarie.



ACTO CLAUSEN

Claudio's aide and Vice Captain of the Imperial Guard. A serious yet pleasant young man.



FRITZ BELL

Clergyman of the state church. Behind the scenes, he is a spy that works in the shadows for Claudio.



EDELTRAUD

The Archmagus of Baltzar. Lazy by nature, but will go on forever about magic and the mystic arts.



ILSE LANCEL

The clergyman assigned as caretaker to Rosemarie and the others while in the holy lands.



ADELINA RITZ

A chambermaid working for the church in the holy lands. This young girl seems to be a hard-working and energetic individual.

LENE

Edeltraud's predecessor and the sorcerer who once served as the guard of the Forbidden Forest.

TERMS

BALTZAR

Magical superpower nation located in the north of the continent. Reveres a mythical creature with the head of Silver Lion and the horns of a goat as a Sacred Beast.

VOLLAND

Small nation some distance away from the superpower that is Baltzar. Livestock and agriculture are its main industries.

KAOLA

In Volland, where it is produced, Kaola seeds are roasted and consumed as a luxury item. Carrying it into foreign countries is banned.

THE SEED OF MANA-SEALING

A seed that restrains mana, overseen by Baltzar's state church. Works by being introduced directly into the body.

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Prologue

“This time I’m finally back to normal,” Claudio said in a harmonious tone. He smiled broadly, causing Rosemarie to become choked up with emotion.

“I am... so very glad.” Reflected in the mirror in front of Claudio, there was no trace of either the moonlight-silver hair of the lion’s head or the curly, goat-like horns with their black obsidian luster. There instead, was a head of sleek black hair and a set of gallant, chiseled facial features. His pair of blue eyes were long, narrow, and rather apt at giving off the coldest of impressions. Right now, though, they were narrow from being pushed up in a tender, joyful smile. The reflection in the mirror was of a dashing young nobleman with an overall regal presence.

Mirrors only reflected the truth. This most likely meant that he would appear in human form not only to Rosemarie’s eyes, but to others as well.

“Seems I can use magic as well.” Claudio suddenly flipped his palm around. In the blink of an eye, a blue bird like the ones at their wedding appeared and flew off, chirping loudly.

Rosemarie fought back the tears trying to spill out of her eyes and smiled.

“I am so relieved I was able to return your mana.” Now Claudio wouldn’t have to worry about anyone hounding his position as crown prince or having his life in jeopardy. The very thought of that brought so much joy to her that she couldn’t contain it. However, at the same time, it also instilled her with a tinge of loneliness.

(I know Prince Claudio said that he had no plans to send me back to Volland even if his mana returned to normal, but... I have an inner trait that steals mana...)

If she were to once again end up stealing away Claudio’s mana, then that would mean throwing out the baby with the bathwater. And if that happened, Rosemarie was sure no one here would accept her as Claudio’s royal wife, and she’d be sent back to Volland.

Containing the swelling pain in her chest with both hands, she forced a smile.

“Okay, now I can inherit the throne without anything holding me down. The people of the kingdom are waiting outside the balcony.” As if in reaction to Claudio’s triumphant statement, a chorus of cheers

erupted from outside the building.

“The... throne? But, His Majesty the King is still alive, so...” Claudio kept on walking toward the balcony, perhaps not even hearing Rosemarie’s inquisitive response. The scarlet lining of the jet-black cape draped over his shoulders fluttered behind him, momentarily overtaking Rosemarie’s field of view. In that short interval is when it happened.

“...Huh?”

Rosemarie’s eyes widened like saucers.

Claudio had physically shrunk. The cape adorning his back was now dragging on the floor. Despite that fact, Claudio somehow didn’t notice and proceeded toward the balcony.

Thinking that maybe her eyes were still afflicted, despite giving back Claudio’s mana, she looked at Claudio’s reflection in the nearby mirror once again—and he had indeed shrunk in size.

“Wait a second, Prince Claudio!” Rosemarie rushed after him and reached out for his cape, unable to make sense out of what was going on. She caught it as it fell away easily in her hands... and she froze in shock.

“What’s the matter? Hurry up, Rosemarie.” Claudio turned around and called out, looking up at Rosemarie with extremely docile eyes.

“P-Prince Claudio...”

“What is it? Why do you look so startled? Ah, I get it, you’re still not mentally ready to stand in front of the citizens? In that case, I’ll proceed ahead and handle matters and you can come out when things are a bit more settled.”

“No, that isn’t what’s wrong. You haven’t reverted back! In fact, your condition is worsening!” She shook her head violently, stepping aside so he could see the mirror. The fantastic form reflecting back at him had the head of a black-haired young man and the body of a winged, silver-haired lion—a sacred beast.

“My face is back to normal, see? And I can use my magic, too. Nothing wrong here. Let’s go. We’re running out of time.”

“No, there *is* something wrong here! I may not have any qualms with your state, but the people out there will surely be aghast!”

Claudio shook his wings as if it were nothing, producing a few palm-sized pale blue flames. He then tried to walk away, but Rosemarie clung to his fluffy neck in pursuit. It didn’t help, as he proceeded to drag her across the floor. It wasn’t long before they were almost at the balcony.

“Please, wait! Someone please stop Prince Claudio! His face is human yet his body is lion, and—”

“*Whose* face is human and body is lion?!”

The sudden shout of anger and the subsequent impact to her head

caused Rosemarie to open her tightly shut eyes. What jumped into her field of view was the face of her husband Claudio, Crown Prince of the Magical Nation of Baltzar. He was glaring at her with an ill-tempered scowl and clutching his forehead.

“...Prince Claudio, you were a human-faced lion and the citizens were out on the balcony, which led to—No, wait, I mean, are you all right?!” She unhandled, not the neck of a silver-haired beast, but a cravat attached to a body that she proceeded to pat down all over, making Claudio red in the face enough to nab her hand.

“Stop that! Are you half-awake and delirious?!” Her seat rocked with the tempo of Claudio’s angry shout, which is where she finally came back to her senses.

She wasn’t in a plain room leading out to the castle’s balcony. She was inside an elegantly decorated carriage adorned with wallpaper featuring the faint image of the Baltzar royal crest. Rosemarie sat on a lavish yet comfortable cotton cushion to save her the strain of sitting. And, clad in his traveling clothes, Claudio was still a regular human young man.

“...I was just...”

“Remember where the two of us are going now?” Claudio let go of Rosemarie’s hand, exasperated. Then, in his seat across from her, he put his elbow against the windowsill to prop his head up and sighed. Rosemarie nodded vigorously, feeling like she was going to break into a cold sweat.

“...Yes! We are currently heading to the Holy Land to participate in the Sacred Relic Worship and meet with someone who might have a clue as to how we might restore your mana. Also, I think I remember drifting off to sleep with my bucket on my head...” Claudio had given her permission, so she took a nap with her trusty safety bucket on her head—or so she thought.

She scanned the carriage interior while rubbing her forehead, which stung for some reason. Upon noticing the silver bucket with the bright-green ribbon tied around the handle at her feet, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Right, you wore it. Yes, you certainly *were* wearing it.” Claudio’s raspy voice made Rosemarie cock her head in confusion as she clutched the bucket in the same way a small child would hug a stuffed animal, until she noticed the red spot on his forehead. The color drained from her face.

“I am so sorry! Did I hit you with my bucket? Huh? Wait, how was I even sleeping for that to...” Rosemarie remembered dozing off while sitting up. Had she leaned forward toward Claudio while in a half-asleep stupor and headbutted him? She looked at Claudio, perplexed, prompting him to quickly avert his eyes. His face, for some reason,

was as red as a beet.

“...You seemed to be having a nightmare, so I tried to wake you up. But then the carriage shook and you jolted awake.” That would explain why Claudio looked away. Rosemarie still didn’t quite understand, but she felt guilty for doing something bad, nonetheless.

“I do apologize, though... I will try not to wear it while in the carriage.”

“Yes, I would appreciate it. Though, I would appreciate it more if you could store it somewhere at the bottom of the storage trunk.”

“Um, well, you see, this bucket is like a part of my body...”

“And I’m telling you to *not* make it one! How long will it take you to understand that humans *don’t* come with detachable parts?”

Claudio furrowed his brow in disappointment as he repeated what he’d been saying all too frequently of late. He was throwing a bitter gaze at the bucket. Over the past few days, Claudio had come to shoot that gaze rather frequently.

“What is so great about that inanimate object, anyway?”

“It may be an inanimate object, but at the same time, it isn’t.”

“...Enough. That nonsense aside, do you still have what I gave you?” Claudio held his forehead wearily and looked at Rosemarie, dubious yet hopeful at the same time. It was a look that made the girl’s pulse skip a beat. She put her hand atop her chest to keep her pounding heart in check. As she did, her fingertips touched something hard beneath the cloth of her dress, and the sweet aroma of Kaola tickled her nostrils.

“Yes, I have it on.”

“I see. Good, then.” Claudio smiled, relieved. However, that smile only served to make her feel butterflies in her stomach. A trickle of heat tinged the back of Rosemarie’s neck, and she shook her head a bit to shake it off. And that was when it came to her.

—*Rosemarie, stay by my side. No, please stay by my side.*

Claudio’s pleading words in the greenhouse after she was cleared of her assassination charges ran past her mind.

While Claudio may have told her to forget what he said, that was practically impossible given his delivery.

(Even so, I must forget. Prince Claudio surely said those words out of the kindness of his heart. If I do not get his mana back to him quickly, his life will be in constant jeopardy.)

She needed to figure out how to return his mana to him so that (among other things) she didn’t let this item Claudio had prepared out of concern for her on their journey go to waste.

Rosemarie remembered how she prayed just as strongly back when he gave this to her, and she clutched the front part of her dress even harder as if to reassure herself that she had made up her mind.

Chapter 1: The Honeymoon Trip that Triggers Turmoil

“...Kiss her.”

That day, in the royal office of Claudio, the Crown Prince of Baltzar, Archmagus Edeltraud stormed in without so much as knocking and said those two simple words. For a moment, time stood still.

The room was gently illuminated by the supple autumn sunlight rather than its harsh summer counterpart, but it felt like the room had frozen over, nevertheless.

Claudio was in the midst of a midday break from work when Rosemarie had come to visit him. Upon hearing those words, Rosemarie almost dropped the cup she held in her hand before her fingers realized the issue and regained their grip. She was only allowed a moment's respite as she heard Claudio hacking loudly as he sat beside her. She put down her cup and started patting his back.

“A-Are you all right, Prince Claudio?”

“...Koff, mm-hgh! Yes, peachy.” Serving them was Rosemarie's personal maid, Heidi, who handed her a napkin with a rather curious expression. Rosemarie then presented the napkin to Claudio.

“I was expecting something out of the blue, but this takes the cake...” As Claudio wiped his mouth with the napkin, he glared at Edeltraud with a scowl set on his brow. The sorcerer, however, in the face of Claudio's anger, leaned forward to the table that held the refreshments and teaware.

“At inquiry, mana returned with Volland Princess's kiss. But, only temporarily. Need to investigate the reason behind it. So, kiss.” Edeltraud was the Archmagus of Baltzar and also Claudio's personal sorcerer, whose various duties included using magic and spells in Claudio's stead since he was currently incapable of doing so. But that never stopped them from saying and doing the most crackpot things imaginable.

As always, a gloomy-looking hooded cloak hid their face from view, but Rosemarie could feel their eyes positively sparkling through the cowl.

Because she saw the heads of humans with negative emotions as beasts, Rosemarie spent all of her time shut in the villa in her native country of Volland. But, by an unexpected turn of events, she ended

up marrying the one person whose head never appeared beastly to her—Claudio, the Crown Prince of Baltzar. That was when she was also informed that the problem with her eyes was a result of her pilfering Claudio's mana.

With his mana stolen, Claudio's head appeared to everyone as the Silver Lion, the sacred beast which lent its power to the founding of the nation of Baltzar. Everyone, that is, except Rosemarie, which landed her in a precarious situation with him. And while she overcame the troubles associated with it and Claudio softened up to her, it wasn't long before Rosemarie found herself suspected of attempting to assassinate him. Claudio, meanwhile, found himself suspected by the archbishop of being mana-less, leading to an official inquiry being held.

Per Edeltraud's instructions, Rosemarie kissed Claudio and his mana returned to him. This led to the archbishop being in the hot seat instead and the assassination plot being wrapped up without a hitch. However, following those events, Claudio's seemingly restored mana disappeared clean out of his body. Rosemarie's eyes still saw his face as a gallant, black-haired young man. But to everyone else around him, he was apparently the prince with the lion head—silver pelt, black goat horns, and all.

Needless to say, she was quite discouraged at the fact that the desperate gambit she pulled off in the hall went to waste. At the same time, she found herself sickened by the small semblance of relief she gained from having a reason to stay by Claudio's side.

(But, they want us to do... *that? Again?* But, after the first time...) Her face flushed with heat.

"After the first time, we tried it again and it didn't return," Claudio said, sighing with his arms folded and flashing a troubled look Rosemarie's way. She tensed her shoulders, her face beet red.

Edeltraud had told them to test it out one more time, so she'd put away her shame and kissed him again. However, it didn't bring back a scrap of mana to Claudio and his face remained beast-like.

"But, returned to normal once, which is something. Must be some sort of stipulation behind it. Want to investigate what it is."

"Be that as it may, what became of your research on the Seed of Mana-Sealing—on the Kaola?" Claudio tossed the question suspiciously to Edeltraud, who was showing no signs of backing down.

What was known as "Kaola" tea in Rosemarie's native country of Volland was known in Baltzar as the "Seed of Mana-Sealing," said to be used long ago as a punishment for criminal sorcerers. Claudio was forced to drink it to keep his tremendous mana in check, since it was likely to hurt him. And since his mana was stolen by Rosemarie, the Seed of Mana-Sealing within him now thirsted for it—effectively

putting his life in jeopardy.

(I think it would be a great help if I could just remember more about when I stole his mana... But this isn't the time or place to worry about my eyes, anyway...)

She saw the heads of anyone who held negative emotions as beast heads, but Claudio's situation, by comparison, was much more serious.

Rosemarie squeezed her hands in her lap as if trying to contain the heaviness taking stay in her chest.

Turning attention away from Rosemarie, Edeltraud drew closer to Claudio.

"Coming along at its own pace. Still, not particularly good, so been waiting for report of thing I asked you for, Claudio. Done that yet?"

"I'm having Fritz investigate into it at the moment. You know that it takes time to do that."

"Even worse because do know. Wasting time. That's why need to investigate different avenues, too." Dodging Claudio's initial question, Edeltraud didn't let up on their pressure for a second. Possibly getting annoyed at all these rebuttals, Claudio waved a hand haphazardly.

"I'll take it into consideration."

"...Um, I wouldn't necessarily *mind* cooperating," Rosemarie timidly came forward, causing Claudio to swing his head back at her in shock. Heidi's eyes also fell upon her as she stood against the wall.

"Princess?!"

"Do you know what you're even say—"

"Really? Okay. Here. Log the time, place and the circumstances. Try for three times a day at the least. But, overdose if you want." Interrupting Heidi and Claudio right in the middle of the shocked exclamations, Edeltraud pulled a stack of papers from their front pocket. The sorcerer pushed the papers at Rosemarie, who took them from the sorcerer, her eyes darting around in confusion.

(Um, is that a prescription? Or maybe medication records?)

Actually, to Edeltraud, these might have been experimentation records instead.

"Okay, first dose. Try it while I'm here."

"Over my dead body!" Claudio shouted with twitching brows, clearly fed up with all this. He snatched away the stack of papers and chucked them across the desk.

"You're insane if you think we're going to log our kissing in gross detail. As for you, Rosemarie, don't just go willfully agreeing to this insanity. Treat yourself with a little more respect, for God's sake."

"Yes, but respecting you and your condition takes top priority, Prince Claudio. If it is something within my power, I implore you to allow me to cooperate in any way that I can." She looked Claudio

straight in his wide-opened eyes and smiled.

While she was thankful that he was being considerate of her feelings, she wanted to give anything within her capabilities a try—if for no other reason than to make amends with Claudio. She was putting her own sense of shame and embarrassment aside in this case.

“Rosemarie... you’re...” A tender smile filled with admiration graced Claudio’s face as he came over to touch Rosemarie’s cheek.

“So, I assure you, you have nothing to worry about. Why, it’s no different from mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, so it will be fine. In fact, if you think of it as a pet dog fawning for affection, then—! Ow, that hurts.” Claudio randomly pinched Rosemarie’s cheek. She shot him a resentful glare as she rubbed the afflicted area.

“You shut up. Pet dog, my foot. If anyone is being kept as a pet here, it is clearly you. If you’re so insistent about it, then let’s just get this over with.” Apparently Rosemarie had made him angry somehow.

With his intense eyes pointed right her, Rosemarie felt a little chicken-hearted. She made an unconscious attempt to gain distance from Claudio, who sat by her side, but he reeled her in by the shoulders.

“Both of you, *out*. I’m not interested in making a spectacle out of this,” he uttered in a deep and monotone voice. Not soon after, Heidi and Edeltraud’s footsteps could both be heard as their presences grew farther away from the room. Rosemarie suddenly found herself faint of heart at that fact and tried to lower her head. But Claudio put his well-defined, manly finger on the girl’s chin and pointed it upward. The blue of his eyes was made even more intense by his anger at they stared directly down at her. That very pair of eyes glimmering with ferocity was causing a tinge of fear to well up from inside Rosemarie.

(He looks like he’s going to bite me...)

Her heart was beating so loudly, it was almost as though it was right next to her ear. Her hand landed on Claudio’s chest in the chaos of being pulled toward him. Through her palm, she felt his heart beating just as fast and just as hard as hers. It felt like all the heat in her body had collected in her face.

Right next to her, Claudio’s finely-crafted lips curled into a slight smile.

“—It’s all your fault, you know.”

“It’s... my fault? But, I—!”

Her sentence barely made it past her vocal cords as it was cut short by her abrupt gasp of air.

With Claudio’s official work finished and the royal office under a shroud of darkness, a rather bright laugh rang throughout the room.

“So? I take it your mana didn’t make it back after all, then?” His aide’s eyes were alight with curiosity and fixed on Claudio, who simply pressed on his forehead and squinted his eyes at him with annoyance while still at his desk.

“Yeah.”

“My, oh, my... Then, it ended up just being a side perk, eh? Looks like I missed quite the show while I was away taking care of business.”

“Will you stop getting your jollies out of this already, Fritz?”

Claudio glared at the clergyman with the mole under his eye, but Fritz shrugged his shoulders, not intimidated in the least.

This was the man who’d freely inquired if Claudio wanted a spy in the same church he was constantly butting heads with. He was a man of the cloth, but also an invaluable resource as Claudio’s aide, preferring to utilize his personal connections and information network on the prince’s behalf rather than wasting away in a corrupt church. He certainly wasn’t without his faults, though, as he could grind a man’s nerves a tad—like he was now.

“Yes, please do not poke fun, Father Fritz. Take into consideration how dispirited His Highness must be, seeing how Her Highness fainted right after!”

“Alto! I explicitly told you *not* to tell him that!”

“Sir, apologies for the slip of tongue...”

Standing at attention by the door was the honest face of the Imperial Guard’s Vice Captain, Alto. Upon Claudio reprimanding him for blowing his cover, he slumped his large shoulders dejectedly. The man was too serious for his own good and often lacked the ability to adapt to situations, but Claudio never once doubted his sense of loyalty in spite of that.

“Now, now. You shouldn’t give our boy Alto here a hard time just because you’re embarrassed about you losing hold of yourself in the grips of passion.”

“Trust me, the grips of passion were nowhere near me. The girl simply lacks tolerance.” He was eventually goaded into locking lips with her. But his lips had barely touched hers when—whether from the sudden rush of blood to her head or just plain nerves—she abruptly fell unconscious. Even though she’d said it would be all right, it made him wonder whether she might secretly hate him after all.

“No tolerance? You have been such a close and happy couple, so it seems a little too late to be saying... wait... Your Highness, don’t tell me that you haven’t properly confessed your feelings to Her Royal Wifeness yet? ‘I love you,’ ‘You’re the apple of my eye,’ things of that nature?” Fritz’s sudden serious expression made Claudio feel awkward—so much so that he turned his eyes away.

“My word, that’s... Ah, so, that’s why. You don’t understand Her

Royal Wifeness's feelings and you're down in the dumps, huh? If that's the case here, then why not just tell her how you feel and get it out of your system?"

"If I were to convey my affection to her outright, then I assume she would feel *compelled* to accept it, given her circumstances. So, no, that simply won't do," Claudio said with a sigh as he balled up the record sheet that Edeltraud had forced onto him.

No matter what, Rosemarie felt indebted for stealing Claudio's mana and causing the deformity to Claudio's head. He was reminded, as he was earlier, that Rosemarie seemed especially enthusiastic over these last few days about returning his mana to him. Thus she'd likely end up doing anything she possibly could.

And he was sure feelings of love or hate were getting thrown into the mix.

He had specifically asked her to stay by his side; but ever since he noticed her recent behavior, he'd become hesitant to be forthright and voice his feelings.

"Plus, I can only assume she resents me for keeping her detained here when she so clearly wishes to go back to Volland." Fritz smiled at Claudio, the slight traces of a mother's kindness upon his face.

"Y'know, Your Highness... You're being a little difficult. Come on, you should just man up and get on out there. Isn't that right, Alto?"

"Yes, well... His Highness has rarely had affections for the ladies and vice-versa, so him being difficul... I mean, making the difficult decision to tread cautiously isn't something he can necessarily help."

Being deemed a difficult and picky man by both of his aides, Claudio gave an annoyed *ahem*.

"Enough of this tripe. I don't need to hear you tell me that. That subject aside, you did bring a report on what I asked of you, right?"

He held out his palm to Fritz, prompting the man—who, incidentally, seemed completely disinterested in the now-vacant archbishop's seat and preferred instead to remain Claudio's personal clergyman—to pull out several sealed letters with a triumphant air.

"I asked several of my acquaintances. But, just as Master Edel mentioned that they wander the lands, the person you asked me to find really does bounce around from place to place, it seems. They won't stay in one place for very long. However, I've finally come to an estimation of their movement. That place would be the closest candidate if you were trying to run into them soon."

Claudio pulled the letter out of the open envelope, scanned it, and raised an eyebrow in surprise. "They'll appear at the Sacred Relic Worship in the Holy Land? But why there, of all places? Churches already shun sorcerers away, but the churches in the Holy Land must be far worse."

“Well, my guess is that we’re dealing with a living bundle of curiosity, wanting to see even though he knows they’ll alienate him. Though I know from the bit of time I spent over there before that it’s actually a *pretty* big deal.” Baltzar would historically send envoys out, but it seemed the royalty of other nations would make the trip themselves.

“So, what’s the plan? I don’t mind going out to the Holy Land and explaining the situation.”

“Just give me the order and I shall accompany Father Fritz in his journey, sir. If they are reluctant to talk, I can get a Seed of Mana-Sealing from Mage Edeltraud and bring them back here, kicking and screaming if need be.”

“Right...”

Fritz was trying for a diplomatic approach through words, while Alto’s suggested approach was much more violent despite his casual tone. Glancing at both men, Claudio put the letter down on his desk and opened his mouth to say...

“Um, Sacred Relic Worship?” Rosemarie blinked, dumbfounded, at the familiar words that Claudio told her.

It was morning, a few days after the whole incident with Edeltraud demanding their kiss. As they commenced their scheduled hand-holding in the lounge of Rosemarie’s quarters to maintain Claudio’s health, that was how he started off the conversation.

The day after that incident, she had given an earnest apology for fainting despite offering her services in the first place, but Claudio comprehended the situation from the start and forgave her, telling her that he didn’t mind. She was relieved in one respect, but spent every day in a self-deprecating rut.

“You’re familiar with it?”

“Yes, if I recall, it is the day the Sacred Relic enshrined in the Holy Land is put on public display, right? Some time ago, my elder sister in Volland attended. She said that the chapel that housed the saint was absolutely stupendous... Oh, um, are you planning to attend, by any chance...” A bad feeling dawned on the girl and she looked with doe eyes at Claudio, sitting across from the table, who grinned deviously back at her.

“Right, I was thinking of attending. And you’re coming along.”

“...M-May I be allowed to wear my bucket?”

“You may. But only during the carriage ride or behind closed doors.”

She was convinced she’d receive the usual scolding about what a bad idea it was, but Claudio good-naturedly allowed it—which was

actually causing distrust to bud within her.

“Is there something going on?” she questioned as she sat up straight in her seat. Claudio simply gave a light squeeze to her hand in his.

“You’re aware that Master Edel has come to a dead end in their Kaola research, right? So, Master Edel wants to pick the brain of the former guard of the Forbidden Forest, hence why they asked me to search for them.”

Rosemarie drew in her lips upon hearing mention of the Forbidden Forest. She remembered when Archbishop Kastner dumped her into that forest—the resting place of the sacred beast, the Silver Lion, and the forest said to make missing persons out of anyone without mana who treads into it.

—Those who come near eaten by sacred beast’s dreams. I’m guard of sacred beast’s dreams.

She’d tried to ask Edeltraud about those mysterious words they’d spoken to her. But the archmagus just smiled suggestively, refusing to divulge the true meaning behind the statement.

(Maybe it’s something that I shouldn’t be asking...)

That thought also prevented her from asking the same question of Claudio.

“Rosemarie? Are you still not awake yet?” Claudio was suddenly looking into Rosemarie’s face with an air of suspicion. She had shut her brain off for a second and, upon noticing Claudio’s face next to hers, she started to blush. It could have been because of what happened the other day to blame, but having him get so close was doing a number on her heart.

“I-I am awake. I’m sorry. You were talking about the guard prior to Mage Edel, yes? Were they even more skilled than Mage Edel?”

Claudio’s suspicion hadn’t faltered. Regardless, he nodded, re-seated himself, and continued speaking.

“I have never personally met them, but they apparently have less mana and magical prowess than Master Edel. However, I’ve heard that they’re a wellspring of knowledge. Word says that they retired when His Majesty the King took the throne, and they now bounce around from place to place.”

That sounded like one sprightly senior citizen. While she didn’t know how old Edeltraud was, if it was their predecessor they were talking about, they had to be up there in age.

“The old guard—their name is apparently Rene, and Fritz was finally able to ascertain that they show up to the Sacred Relic Worship every time. While I could send someone to bring them to Baltzar, since we’re trying to borrow their knowledge, I plan on going out to the Holy Land to see them. After all, Master Edel isn’t the best at

looking at soul conditions. We should have them look at our soul conditions while we're at it, as well."

"Soul... conditions?" The sudden talk about "souls" had her confused. Anything to do with magic was completely lost on her.

"Oh, right. Skilled sorcerers can see the shape of the soul. And by doing so, they can know of any physical problems you may possess. Mage Rene was present when I was forced to drink the Seed of Mana-Sealing, so that much I am sure about."

Rosemarie stared intently at Claudio in shock. "—All right, then. In that case, I shall gladly accompany you."

Claudio, perhaps shocked by Rosemarie's unusually straightforward reply, widened his eyes a tad before grimacing as if he caught on to something.

"Did I say something to hurt your feelings?"

"Huh?"

"Any other time, you would be asking me to wear your bucket, wouldn't you? So, it makes me worry if I've made yet another insensitive remark when I tell you we'll be going out in public, and you're suddenly motivated out of nowhere."

Claudio awkwardly averted his eyes.

—I wouldn't find the fact that you can instantly identify people who harbor animosity cumbersome at all; in fact, I'm envious.

Claudio's rather thoughtless and hurtful remark was still fresh in her memory. However, now that she knew Claudio's personality better, she didn't think much about what he had said—but it seemed that the feeling wasn't mutual.

He squeezed his hand in hers, and Rosemarie returned the favor by squeezing back.

"I never said that, so you needn't worry, please. The reason I am so suddenly motivated is because I think we might find a clue to help return your mana... And it is far better than leaving the matter be and ignorantly inconveniencing you once again."

Whether it were stealing away Claudio's mana unwittingly or exposing Claudio's life to mortal danger by having him drink Kaola tea while not knowing it was the Seed of Mana-Sealing—she had been doing a host of things that she couldn't live with herself being ignorant about forever. If she let this matter be, she felt like she would just screw up even more.

"—Plus, if I'm with you, Prince Claudio, no place will ever scare me."

Claudio was a strong individual. She knew that he was the type never to give up and do his best no matter what dilemma he was faced with. Instead of hiding his deformed head, ashamed of people's fear of it, he would search for a way to make everyone come to accept it.

(I don't want to sit around doing nothing and lamenting how pathetic I am forever.)

If she was staying by Claudio's side until she returned his mana, then she wanted to be stronger.

She stared at Claudio and smiled bashfully. Claudio covered his face with his other hand and turned his head to the side. The space under his eyes was red.

"I get it. I'm in the same league as Kaola and the bucket. I just have to not take it too seriously." Rosemarie could hear him muttering under his breath, making her tilt her head, confused.

"Um, I can't imagine holding hands with Kaola or my bucket and enjoying conversation like this, so I don't think that you're the same as either of those things, Prince Claudio..."

Claudio looked at her, questioningly.

"You enjoy it?"

"Yes, I learn so much whenever I speak with you, so I love it. Are you not a fan, Prince Claudio?" If memory served her right, she remembered Claudio telling her that he enjoyed spending time with her, but maybe she was just remembering things wrong?

His face took a hit like someone lied straight to it. He then blinked as if coming out of a dream and opened his mouth hesitantly.

"Rosemarie..."

"Yes?"

"Give me your neck."

"*Pardon?!* Sorry, but no!" She jerked back in surprise. Her blood curdled. Had she said something offensive enough to warrant a beheading?

"No, wait, bad choice of words. Sorry, just stick out your neck a little."

Per Claudio's instructions, uncomfortable-looking scowl on his face and all, Rosemarie leaned over the table timidly and closed her eyes. Once she did, she felt something fall over her neck. When she opened her eyes and looked down, she saw something silver and glimmering dangling over her chest. Hanging from her neck was a silver-chained pendant. Locked behind the finger-sized, birdcage-like item at the end of the chain was something elliptical and brown. As she held the silver cage, which seemed likely to break under even the slightest pressure, a sweet smell drifted through the air.

"This is... Is there, by some chance, Kaola stored in here?"

"We can't bring Kaola tea where we're going. So, this is in lieu of that."

"Yes, that is true, but... You have already given me so much, I couldn't possibly take any more from you."

Claudio smiled mischievously as Rosemarie let her brows drop

uncomfortably.

He had even given her a whole greenhouse. Seeing as how she hadn't been able to give him a single thing in return, any more would make her feel sorrier than she already felt.



She went to remove the pendant, but Claudio stopped her hands. “That’s your ‘Tranquilizer #2,’ isn’t it? Consider it medicine and accept it. It would be helpful to me, too.”

“It would help you? Um, well, in that case... I thank you very much. I will take good care of it.” She figured that keeping a level head about things would serve to help Claudio, which allowed her to accept the gift. Once she said her thanks, Claudio smiled, obviously relieved.

“I will make sure not to be an inconvenience to you in the Holy Land!”

“Don’t get so worked up. After all, we might actually see the old guard—Mage Rene, just like we planned. Besides, the Holy Land are seaside. You should loosen up enough to enjoy the scenery, at least. Oh, right. You might be able to see that flower that was in that book the other day, you know.”

“Flower...? Um, let’s see...” Rosemarie thought, rising from her seat. She brought a book from the corner of the room and opened it up on the table for Claudio. Illustrated on the page was a flower with five bluish-white petals arranged in a way that resembled a human face.

“Do you mean this one?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. This flower only blooms near the sea, doesn’t it?”

“It does! It’s a type of violet, and its petals are clear like glass. It’s said that when the wind blows, it scrapes against the petals and makes a beautiful sound...”

Seeing Claudio peer in interest at the illustration of the rare violet snapped her back to her senses, and the book she’d so giddily opened was suddenly snapped shut.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um, this is official business for the most part, so I will keep my personal interests to a minimum. Oh... isn’t it about time you start work...?” Rosemarie urged in a somewhat rushed tone. Claudio stood up, looking at her suspiciously. She followed in suit and stood up as well.

(This isn’t a sightseeing expedition and I shouldn’t be getting excited over it. I need to focus myself...)

Rosemarie followed after him to see him off, but Claudio turned around at the door so suddenly that she almost bumped into him and tottered on her feet. In the momentum, a sharp pain ran across the back of her neck.

“...Yow.”

“By the way, the greenhouse’s—What? Did something happen to

the back of your neck?"

"It seems the chain got snagged in my hair... Oh, please, go on ahead. Don't worry about me." She put her hand on the back of her neck and felt around, but she couldn't quite get the chain loose.

"Don't just pull at it randomly. You'll damage your pretty hair."

"P-Pretty? But it isn't..."

"Come, now, turn around. I'll untangle it."

Still shook up over the rare compliment, she turned herself around. She lowered her head and threw her hair to the front. Claudio's cold fingers touched the nape of her neck, making her heart jump in her chest.

(I don't know why, but this is a little embarrassing...)

It was a spot that not even she could see. Plus, she would only ever put up her hair when making a formal appearance. She was embarrassed at the fact that she was having someone see a spot that no one would normally see.

"Well, I got my hair stuck in the yew tree that one time and had to trouble you to help me out, so I'll keep it tied up from now on." She tried to start up conversation to distract herself from her heart going aflutter, and there was a slight pause before Claudio answered, probably from being lost in concentration.

"...No, you can keep it as-is. Just keep it hidden. It's poison to the eyes." His fingers parted from her body. At the same time, Claudio walked past her and exited the room.

(Poison to the eyes? What does that mean? Does he mean it's literally an eyesore? Or, is it actually...)

She racked her confused brain. She shifted a bit, and the aroma of Kaola wrapped around her body. The back of her neck heated up ever so slightly. Instantly, she grasped the back of her neck with both hands.

The door that was supposed to be closed then swung open.

"Princess, are you going on a honeymoon trip?!"

"—! Heidi, bring me my bucket!"

Her trusted maid flew into her room positively elated and Rosemarie clung on to her, half in tears.

(What am I remembering this for...?)

Rosemarie sat in the carriage bound to the Holy Land, recalling her decision and details behind her attending the Sacred Relic Worship—in fact, she remembered too many of the details and got red in the face.

"Rosemarie," Claudio called out, "we're taking a break."

"—! Y-Yes, okay!" Rosemarie jumped out of her seat.

It seemed the carriage had stopped at some point while she was lost in thought. Claudio descended from the carriage and held out his hand to Rosemarie, who took it to make her own exit. As she did, she caught sight of Alto and Fritz standing at attention near the carriages, along with the attending magistrate and guard knights. Edeltraud was also supposed to be there, but she couldn't spot them. She also tried looking around for Heidi, but the maid came silently walking up to her from the side. Then, Heidi threw the warm-looking shawl in her hands over Rosemarie's shoulders. Her eyes were brimming with curiosity.

"Thank you, Heidi."

"Not a problem. The wind is quite cold. But the scenery here is exquisite!" Heidi commented in an enthusiastic tone as Rosemarie left her behind to follow Claudio's lead.

They both ended up atop a slightly raised hill. Serving as their backdrop was a dense forest—not quite to the degree of the Forbidden Forest, but still quite dense. Below the hill, she could see a townscape with white stucco walls. Beyond that, shimmering in the sunlight, was a vast plain in a shade of blue different from the sky—a more azure blue...

"Is that... the ocean? This is my first time seeing it." It was an endlessly expanding body of water. Occasionally, a white spot became visible—possibly bubbles from the ruffled waves? The way it shone in the light of the midday sun was more awe-inspiring than the glimmer of lapis. A truly beautiful sight to behold.

The curtains were drawn on the windows of the carriage, so she didn't get to take in the outside view. On one hand, she marveled at the beauty; on the other, her body started shivering at the realization that she had finally made it here.

"Seems to be. This is my first time seeing it as well. It's incredible," Claudio said in admiration as he stood beside Rosemarie, who looked up at him in surprise.

(Oh, right. This is Prince Claudio's first time out of the country, isn't it?)

Not only did he develop a beast head due to his mana being stolen, but the robbery triggered health problems as well. He couldn't very well carry out diplomatic duties like that.

"Um, are you holding up all right?"

"I am. No problems to speak of. All thanks to you being around for me."

"No, um, seeing as how this is all my fault to begin with, well..."

Either it was the overall exhilaration or the rare carefree smile that Claudio was pointing her way, but Rosemarie turned her eyes away, on edge.

“Don’t worry about that. At any rate, from what I’m told, the town below is the Holy Land. The cathedral is at the edge of that cape.”

Rosemarie looked in the direction he was pointing and spotted the spire at the edge of the cape. However, for being the cathedral of the Holy Land, the actual building itself wasn’t all that big, and it was much more simplistic than the church in Baltzar where their wedding was held.

“It’s quite the... well... cute little building, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. From what I can make out from here, at least.”

Seeing Claudio’s suggestive smile, Rosemarie pursed her lips and once again turned her attention toward the church.

They were going over there soon—over there, to the place established by the saint who took upon him the revelations of God.

In Baltzar, Claudio’s deformed head was taken in relative stride, but over here, he would probably be a target for scorn. She had no idea how they would come to treat him.

“The people of the Holy Land, will they...” she started to say, trying to look up at Claudio by her side, but she found herself having a dizzy spell.

Suddenly, her mind evoked images of that forest—the one that was even richer in green than the forest at their backs, the Forbidden Forest. Opposite it, the sacred beast stood, its silver pelt shining even within the dimly-illuminated forest.

It shook its pair of light wings and approached Rosemarie slowly, causing a mix of awe, exhilaration, and other emotions to well within her.

On the opposite side, a young Claudio came running up to her with a panicked face.

The sacred beast’s positively gigantic body was right beside her, and it opened its mighty jaw to—

“What about the people of the Holy Land?” Claudio’s question snapped Rosemarie back to her senses. The girl stood there, flabbergasted, at what she had just seen.

Claudio looked at her with suspicion. His eyes were blue in color, but were beast-like, lacking whites. His skin was covered in a short silver fur, and growing out of a bountiful mane were a pair of curly goat-like horns that were black like obsidian. Claudio was the spitting image of the Silver Lion, the sacred beast of Baltzar.

(Was that an incident from my childhood just now? Also, why does his head look like the sacred beast to my eyes, too?)

Rosemarie quickly rubbed her eyes. However, rub as she might, Claudio’s face remained that of the Silver Lion.

“Prince Claudio, would you mind lowering your head a little?”

“My head? Like this?” Claudio stooped his head down and she

timidly reached for his face. Her fingers made contact with the silver hair, which was softer than appearance led to believe. She ran her hand across the fine-quality hair in a trance until she bumped against one of the icy cold goat horns, and that was when it finally sunk in.

"I'm... not dreaming. My eyes..." This was the beastly form of the prince that everyone else saw. His head of a beast and his body of a youthful gentleman—his appearance was definitely enough to strike fear into anybody.

She knew that she wasn't seeing this Silver Lion head because Claudio was harboring negative emotions toward her. If that were the case here, then it should have been obvious when she touched his head.

"What in the world is going on? Suddenly groping my head like... that...?" Claudio grabbed Rosemarie's hand, annoyed, started to say something and then looked down with a gasp. Claudio was ever-perceptive. He most likely noticed.

"Don't tell me... I look like a Silver Lion to your eyes, too... right?" His voice was tense.

Rosemarie slightly rocked her shoulders upon feeling Claudio's eyes stare right into her. That tiny gesture was enough to make Claudio drop his head, release her hand and turn his face away.

"—Don't look at me," he warned her in an unpleasant tone, stepping away to escape Rosemarie's gaze. His magnificent mane swayed in the autumn breeze.

"Prince Claudio."

"Please, don't look at me."

Reacting fast, Rosemarie latched onto a piece of Claudio's clothing as he tried to get away and circled around to his front, but he was hiding his face with his arm. His lion ears kept to the back as if frightened.

Seeing Claudio—the same Claudio that wouldn't bat an eye even if given looks of disdain or badmouthed by someone—act in such an unexpected manner was heartrending for Rosemarie.

(Is he telling me not to look because I'd be afraid of his beast head? Or is he afraid of me looking at him like others do?)

She wondered what frame of mind Claudio meant by telling her not to look at him. If it were a case of not wanting eyes of animosity to befall you because you trust a person, then Rosemarie could relate herself. And even though she did trust him, seeing his head suddenly as a beast was extremely frightening.

Rosemarie gathered all her nerve to reach out to Claudio and softly touch his mane.

"I'm sorry. I'm messing up your... hair? Or, your mane? Well, nomenclature aside, I find myself in a bind."

“A bind?” It seemed her words caught him off-guard because Claudio removed the arm from his face and looked with eyes wide. She couldn’t quite tell from his animal features, but he was probably emoting surprise.

“Yes, a bind. Because I cannot tell you that you look pale in the face and give you a reason to rest...” Claudio would always use the fact that he couldn’t make out if he was pale in the face or not as an excuse to overwork himself.

“But now that I know that your pelt is so nice and fluffy, I find myself wanting to pet it, which is also putting me in a bind.” She reached out and tenderly stroked the same mane that she’d rustled, until Claudio grabbed her hand and brought his face to her shoulder. His whiskers pricked at her cheek a bit.

“Prince Claudio? Are you not feeling well? Oh, are you carriage-sick?”

“You’re not... afraid? My face is beastly.” His deep voice rang next to her ear, prompting her to freeze her hand that was going over to rub his back.

“No, I’m not. What I am afraid of is seeing animosity and lies turning into beastly form. I am afraid of knowing that one’s words and true feelings are mismatched. If your face remained this way, then I wouldn’t mind it, either. Because it doesn’t mean that you yourself have changed, Prince Claudio.” She didn’t know every single facet about Claudio, but she thought that she knew a decent amount. He was tough on himself and never let up the slack. Even if people were to look at him in shock and awe, he would ignore it. In fact, he would even use that to his advantage. Also, he may have a crass tongue, but he was kind at his core. His face simply changing wasn’t grounds for fear.

“—Yes, being around you makes it easier to breathe, indeed,” he uttered in relief as he leaned in and took her tight into his embrace. As she started to worry that he really might not be feeling well, she finally realized that everyone else’s eyes were concentrated on them. They were a short distance away, so they probably couldn’t overhear their conversation, but since they weren’t under shelter, everyone could get a good look at what they were doing.

The magistrate and knights scrambled to avert their eyes. It was incredibly obvious that Heidi and Fritz were trying desperately to hide the smirks on their faces. Seeing that, Rosemarie felt the embarrassment swell up from inside.

“U-Um, we should go someplace else. If you are not feeling well, then going back to the carriage would...”

“Do you dislike this?”

“I *do not* dislike this, no. It is just that... I think it is becoming one

of those spectacles that you said yourself you are none too fond of.”

“Just for now, I don’t care even if it is a spectacle. If you don’t dislike it, then let me replenish for a little while longer.”

“If you’re replenishing mana, then we can hold hands and...”

She tried to argue against this, but the wild galloping of hooves beat on her ears, cutting Rosemarie off mid-sentence. Alto, who had been at attention next to the carriage, formed his earnest-looking features into a sharp expression and poised himself in front of Claudio. Following in his example, the other knights drew caution to the forest where the sound was resonating from.

(Something is coming!) The thicket shook violently, and storming out from the brush came a giant wild boar with a great pair of tusks. Something white was clinging to its head.

“Alto.”

“Sir!” Alto replied to Claudio’s calm call in a short and sweet manner, standing in the boar’s path as it charged toward them.

“Be careful...! Huh?!”

She was convinced that Alto was going to get sent flying; but, in the next instant, he firmly nabbed the boar’s tusks and chucked it over his shoulder. The boar slammed to the ground with a crash, and it stayed there, twitching all the while.

(Huh? What? *Excuse me?* You’re *kidding*, right?!) As Rosemarie stood there dumbfounded, her mouth agape, a jovial voice rang through the area and broke the silence.

“My, my! Nicely done!” There, giving an amused round of applause, was the moled clergyman in gaudy priest garb, Fritz. That act started a chain, which helped the others relieve their tension.

“Plucky Alto, the ever-courageous.”

“Please, it’s nothing to praise me for...”

Rosemarie still stared in a daze at Alto, who responded bashfully to Fritz’s compliments, but a small shake on the shoulders from Claudio finally snapped her back to her senses.

“S-Squire Clausen, he just... the boar...”

“Oh, you didn’t know? His full-contact combat skills far outshine his swordplay. That is why he didn’t participate in the Imperial Bout.”

“Be that as it may, I have never heard of a knight standing up to a boar and tossing it away with their bare hands...”

He himself mentioned that “he had a habit of getting riled easily in heat of battle, which makes him all thumbs, so he wouldn’t stand much of a chance.”

“I remember that one field exercise where he ran into a bear and came out relatively unscathed. He did so bare-handed then, as well.”

“Did Squire Clausen... grow up in the wild, or something of the sort?” Given Alto’s very regal and knightly appearance, it was all hard

to imagine. Rosemarie pursed her lips, concerned, and Alto turned to where they stood, looking a bit happy.

“Your Highness! What shall we do with this? Feast upon it?”

“...It’s only unconscious. Return it to the forest,” Claudio ordered, almost sighing, and Alto slumped his shoulders in a somewhat disappointed fashion as his head began to transform before Rosemarie’s eyes into a deer’s head with fine horns.

(Prince Claudio cannot eat anything other than soup, so I would suppose that Squire Clausen was asking because he wanted to eat it himself... Huh? Does that mean... he ate the *bear*?)

Her mind started to dream up images of wild animals spread across a dinner table—which she immediately dispersed by shaking her head.

She watched as the guard knights went to grab the unconscious boar in order to return it to the forest. As they did, something white flew out of the boar’s body. Instinctively, Claudio stuck out his arms in an attempt to shield her. However, an abrupt breeze caused it to fly high into sky, as light as a tree leaf.

“Flies well,” said a monotone voice. Appearing suddenly beside Claudio was the gloomy sorcerer, Edeltraud, with a hand pointed toward the sky. That was when Rosemarie finally realized that the archmagus had used a spell to stir up a wind.

Rosemarie let loose a sigh of relief while Claudio let loose a sigh of frustration.

“What was *that*? More importantly, where did you go off to, Master Edel? Rosemarie’s eyes, they’ve—”

“Reconnaissance on the town. Oh.” Edeltraud answered, cutting Claudio short, but they gasped in surprise not soon after. Something plopped right onto the top of Rosemarie’s head from above.

“Huh? W-What is this?!” She shook it off in a knee-jerk reaction, and it fell limply to the ground. What had fallen had fluffy white fur and a mop-like tail that covered its back. It stretched out as if trying to unify with the ground, showing the thin membrane that stretched from its front paws to its hind legs as a silver, flower-like emblem showed itself on its tiny forehead.

“A flying squirrel...?”

“Fur is a tad on the white side, but it’s a flying squirrel, indeed. So, this is the thing that came flying out, huh? I’m guessing this was the thing that was stuck on the boar’s face? False alarm, I see... Ah, right, Master Edel, mind giving them a hand carrying that boar?”

Blanked-out, Rosemarie overlooked the annoyed-looking Claudio and the nodding Edeltraud as the pair walked over to Alto and the other knights. Instead, she picked up the unmoving squirrel.

“Don’t just go picking it up. It’ll bite you and you’ll get hurt.”

“Yes, but... I knocked it over when I shook it off me. It also got blown away by Master Edel...” As she consoled the creature by stroking its fine pelt, its belly gave a tiny growl and it slowly opened its eyes.

Before she could process that they were open, it jumped for her chest—or, to be more accurate, it jumped for the Kaola seed pendant that was sticking out under her dress. The little creature was apparently hungry.

“You can’t have this. Heidi, do we have anything for it?”

“You don’t need to give it anything. Hurry up and return it to the forest so we can be off.” A knot formed near Claudio’s muzzle in frustration as he yanked the squirrel off Rosemarie by the scruff of its neck. He walked off toward the forest carrying the squirrel as it squeaked in an attempt to threaten him. But in the midst of his steps, the squirrel thrashed violently enough to escape Claudio’s hand, run up his arm, and clamped itself tightly over his muzzle.

“—!”

“Oh, Prince Claudio!”

“Princess, I’ve got a cookie!”

In a panicked attempt to free him of the creature, Rosemarie took the cookie Heidi had run up with and held it up to the squirrel. The squirrel twitched its little nose as if wary, but it soon gave in and jumped over to Rosemarie’s arm. Freed of the tiny animal’s clutches, Claudio had a grand coughing fit, possibly because of the sudden rush of air back into his lungs.

“A-Are you okay?”

“...I thought I was going to meet my maker there for a second.” That was a fair assumption. After all, that squirrel was positively glued to his face. Despite Claudio’s beast head, it managed to get a really good grip on it.

“Let’s hurry along. Nothing good can come from keeping ourselves here.”

Rosemarie indiscreetly pondered over the doubts coming up in her mind. Claudio, frustrated, grabbed the squirrel as it focused on nibbling its cookie on Rosemarie’s arm, walked over to a tree, and set it upon a branch. After which, he immediately boarded the carriage. As Rosemarie followed Claudio into the carriage, she turned back to the tree to look for the squirrel. As she did, she caught sight of Edeltraud, who was standing motionless, facing the tree.

(Mage Edel? What are they looking at?)

They had most likely finished transporting the boar, since Rosemarie couldn’t see it anywhere. But now she saw Edeltraud just standing there, staring at the spot where Claudio had placed the squirrel.

“Rosemarie, hurry on. Master Edel, I need to speak with you, so join us.”

Rosemarie took Claudio’s hand per his instructions and boarded the carriage, albeit still concerned.

The carriage rocked slightly as Edeltraud sat across from Rosemarie, listening to her story. The mage then pointed their eyes toward the floor, contemplating. Claudio sat next to Rosemarie, his face still in beast form, tensing his forehead and spinning his gears in similar fashion.

It seemed that she could tell he was tensing his forehead in spite of his beast face.

Once she’d informed Edeltraud that Claudio’s face appeared as a Silver Lion even to her eyes, the sorcerer prompted her to go into detail.

“When we were inside the carriage, Prince Claudio’s face looked human. Although, I did have a bit of a bad dream...”

“Oh, right. You said something about a ‘human-faced lion’ and jumped up, now that you mention it.”

“Please don’t make fun of me.”

Claudio’s mocking tone invited a slightly dissatisfied glare from Rosemarie. Edeltraud took this opportunity to lift their head.

“Having a dream... Volland Princess, could be because of your mental condition.”

Her heart thumped.

(Don’t tell me that I’m actually thinking that Prince Claudio’s head is better off not returning to normal, right?)

After all, she was able to stay by Claudio’s side so long as it wasn’t back to normal.

However, that also meant that Claudio’s mana wouldn’t return to him and the Seed of Mana-Sealing would end up killing him. It was extremely selfish of her.

She squeezed her hand in her lap and Claudio lightly tapped it.

“Quit brooding over it. I’m not dead yet and panicking won’t help.”

She couldn’t tell his mood from his expression, but his kind and consoling voice was contributing even more to her guilt.

Claudio might well believe that Rosemarie had fallen into a rut, feeling rushed and obligated to return his mana as soon as possible.

(I said I would stop all this worrying.)

She pursed her lips and smiled at Claudio.

“Yes, I will settle myself down. I am sure this is only temporary.” That was what she decided to believe. Since the mystic arts were

strange and mysterious, nothing was out of the realm of possibility. Edeltraud nodded in agreement.

“Might be the case. Either that or problem lies in this ‘Holy Land’ place. Might be other problems as well. Not enough here to base decision. Something happen right before started to see him like that?” Edeltraud conjectured. Rosemarie didn’t know if what she was about to say was somehow related, but she opened her mouth and said it anyway.

“I remembered a bit of when I was lost in the Forbidden Forest as a child. I was about to be attacked by the Silver Lion, but just as I was, Claudio came dashing up to... me... Huh?” The contradiction came to her as she said that—what she was recalling was different from what Claudio told her.

In Claudio’s account, he said that he went looking for her after she was lost in the Forbidden Forest only to find her crying at the top of a tree. Not once did he ever mention the Silver Lion.

“Was that really a memory of yours? That wasn’t... a dream?” Claudio asked with a tinge of skepticism.

“I have no idea. Maybe that is the case...” Whatever confidence Rosemarie had had in the subject drained right away. Edeltraud let out a hearty sigh.

“What they call ‘memories’ are vague things. Could be that Claudio’s memories are different, too. Might know the truth if we get memories into alignment.” The unexpected statement made Rosemarie meet eyes with Claudio.

“The truth, eh? You have a point. I was shaken up over having my mana stolen at the time, after all... It wouldn’t surprise me if I had forgotten something myself, I suppose.”

“—Um, speaking of which, Mage Edel, how is your recollection of what happened then?” Rosemarie questioned, prompting Edeltraud to cock their head slightly in thought. Despite not knowing their age, their gesture seemed rather young and immature; it didn’t give off the impression of an archmagus at all.

“Wasn’t in the Forbidden Forest at time. In a meeting with King’s aides in preparation for National Foundation Day. But, did tell Claudio that he could come in and out of guard post. By time I realized Silver Lion was astir and ran back, Claudio was collapsed outside the forest and you weren’t anywhere. Hence, don’t really know if you and Claudio met acquaintance or what happened in forest.”

“The Silver Lion astir...? Um, the Silver Lion is dead, is it not?” Their phrasing made it seem as if it were alive and well. Edeltraud paused for a second before nodding firmly.

“—It is dead. Corpse remains, turned to bones. But soul still wanders. Making sure doesn’t exit Forbidden Forest is guard’s duty.”

“Guard...” She suddenly recalled those mysterious words that Edeltraud had refused to clarify. Perhaps now that Claudio was present, they would give a proper answer.

“Um, Mage Edel, before you said, ‘Those who come near all eaten by sacred beast’s dreams. I’m the guard of the sacred beast’s dreams.’ But what does that mean?”

Edeltraud chuckled and the nearby Claudio just sighed.

“That’s just Master Edel speaking cryptically. The rumors say that the ghost of the sacred beast wanders the Forbidden Forest and that it will attack you if you approach it. Since those without mana who enter the forest actually *do not* come back, it cannot be cast aside as simple superstition. That is all they’re saying, minus the tomfoolery.”

“Certain people cower when ‘ghost’ is said. Just changed phrasing to soften blow,” Edeltraud nonchalantly answered, making Rosemarie go limp.

(I guess I shouldn’t take Mage Edel’s words very seriously...)

She figured that if she had the time to worry over something, she was better off coming to someone else about it.

Rosemarie took a breath to regain her composure, then nervously looked at Claudio.

“Only a guess, but could it be that the reason I have memories of being attacked by the Silver Lion is because I heard the rumor somewhere when I first came to Baltzar?”

Claudio’s whiskers twitched. His broad nose wrinkled. “Well, that is a possibility as well... But, as for me, something doesn’t feel right about the entire matter of a lone child venturing off into a forest that grim and uninviting.”

“You certainly have a point there... Though, I conjecture we’ll have a little more insight once I remember the reason.” Also, talking to the old guard in the Holy Land might give them even more of a clue toward solving this mystery.

With renewed determination, Rosemarie took a deep breath and pursed her lips.

Chapter 2: The Light and Darkness of the Underground Church

Long ago, in a place composed of steep cliffs, a coastline bombarded year round with raging waves, and arid, barren lands, there lived people. Those people lived very poor lives, and were barely able to keep themselves fed from day to day.

The townspeople were down on their luck and struggled to survive. In spite of that, they revered God and offered forth meager tidings of wine and bread scraped together from what wheat they had.

A clergyman by the name of Kamil stopped by the town in the midst of his pilgrimage.

As Kamil reeled in heartache for the plight of the poor townspeople, a revelation from God descended upon him from the heavens.

—Go forth and excavate that which is in the soil of the church.

Kamil and his ten disciples dug up the churchyard, unearthing rock salt as white as the driven snow beneath the soil. Dubbed “white gold,” it was distributed far and wide, making the lives of the townspeople flourish as a result.

The people revered Kamil and his disciples as saints and enshrined them in the church.

“And the Holy Land’s underground cathedral was built in the rock salt mining tunnels, correct?” Rosemarie summarized to confirm with Claudio, who sat beside her. Claudio squinted at the glimmers of sunlight coming through the cracks between the curtains of the carriage window. The light bounced off his silver pelt into a fine sheen. Edeltraud sat in the seat opposite her, leaning sluggishly against the window.

Rosemarie’s carriage passed through the areas in town bustling with people who had come to observe the Sacred Relic Worship and descended a gentle slope leading to the cape.

“That’s right. Normally, rock salt can’t be mined near the sea. It would never survive the humidity. The soil here is a special mixture of bedrock and rock salt, which is the main reason they can. Considering that the site was where this ‘miracle salt’ was excavated from, it was probably the perfect spot to build a church.”

“With the ‘Sacred Relic’ being what was dug up along with it, yes? They say it can turn seawater into fresh water...”

“Yes, apparently so. Although, the Sacred Relic Worship has been going on for the past ten-odd years, and has been kept under wraps by the word of God until then.” Tension lines formed across Claudio’s snout, and he seemed to be holding back a desire to voice skepticism. Rosemarie knitted her brows lightly.

“Are you trying to say it’s some sort of fabricated tale?”

“I’m not necessarily saying the whole thing is true, but I assume that there’s a huge portion of exaggeration and fiction in the mix. These types of stories are generally designed to bring in followers. Believing it or not is up to the individual. Rest easy, though. I’m not denying your faith, either.” Claudio said that with a voice that sounded tender, but Claudio himself probably never believed the story from the get-go. And, if she had to assume, probably not in God, either.

(Archbishop Kastner abhorred him, so it might be only natural that he would lose faith...)

If clergymen had told him since he was a child that a deformed head was the mark of heresy, it was no surprise he’d end up that way.

(The only ones he trusts are me, his aides, and... He has staked some faith in me... right?)

She wasn’t exactly confident enough to think that, however.

Rosemarie looked over at Edeltraud, who was so silent that she suspected them of being asleep, and tightened her grip on the bucket in her lap.

—*Rosemarie, stay by my side. No, please stay by my side.*

Those words that popped into her mind cleared the doubts that reared their ugly heads.

(Back then, *I* was the one who wanted to believe those words the most.)

If Claudio needed her by his side, she would be there—that desire was just as alive as ever.

The carriage ascended a gentle slope and came to an easy stop. It seemed they’d reached the cathedral. Edeltraud opened the door first and descended from the carriage.

Anxiety caused Rosemarie’s body to freeze up. She had made up her mind, but it wasn’t going to be realized until she completely wiped her fear away.

As she held the Kaola pendant that lay under her dress and took a deep breath to recompose herself, Claudio chuckled to himself.

“No need to wear your bucket?”

“...Well, I would like to if I were allowed to.” A bit of the tension dropped from her shoulders at Claudio’s teasing. Appreciative of that, she stepped off the carriage and proceeded to the entrance of the church—which looked as simple up close as it did from far away. The

guard knights and accompanying magistrate—everyone else aside from Claudio's entourage of three and Heidi—held their positions.

There was quite the idyllic atmosphere, emphasized by the goats grazing in the churchyard. It was a sight that was common to her mother country of Volland, which helped soothe her soul and regain her composure even more.

At the arciform entrance, several clergymen—priests and bishops alike—all silently greeted them while lined up in front of the door.

(I knew it, beast heads on every single one...)

However, she wasn't sure whether this was because the clergymen weren't feeling inviting, or if they were simply afraid of Claudio.

She almost put her head down from the fear, but fought hard to keep her head up and choke out a smile.

"Your Highness, the Crown Prince of Baltzar, Claudio... and Your Highness, the Crown Princess Rosemarie. I would like to cordially thank you for traveling all this way to pay this visit." A clergyman was the first to greet them cheerfully, but cheerful in tone alone as his head was that of a long-haired brown dog.

"I am humbled that the cardinal himself would come to greet us. You enjoyed a stay in our country the recently, yes?"

"Indeed, I especially enjoyed being present for the Imperial Bout and having the honor of watching you gallantly in action, Prince Claudio."

The pair were shown into the church as they exchanged harmless banter. Once they were inside, the cardinal stopped suddenly in his tracks. Their gaze landed on Rosemarie's back, then moved to Edeltraud, who stood in silence, the hood of their cloak still pulled over their head.

"Excuse me. You, in the indigo cloak. Might you be a sorcerer, by any chance?"

"I am. So what?"

"I am dreadfully sorry, but sorcerers are forbidden entry into the church. Every nation complies with this, so I would greatly appreciate it if you forgave us. I shall have you escorted to lodgings in the city."

Edeltraud turned themselves around. Given that gloomy indigo cowl they were wearing, they did objectively look suspicious. After all, they didn't have any skin exposed aside from the area around their mouth. And, since Rosemarie didn't dare ask, she still didn't know their gender.

"What is the reasoning behind that?"

"It is an order that has been in place since the time when Saint Kamil still drew breath on this earth. So I beg your understanding, please." The cardinal closed out his complete lack of explanation with a bow.

Claudio threw a sharp look down at the cardinal, followed by another back Edeltraud's way. Then he opened his mouth and said, "As far as sorcerers go, I'll have you know that I am also one."

"Hahaha, I have faith that you will abstain from the use of magic within church walls, sir."

A chill ran up Rosemarie's spine as she caught on to the psychological warfare unfolding behind this innocuous conversation.

(So, let me get this straight—sorcerers are barred from entry not because their mana would affect the church, but simply because they are heretics, right?)

It was mincing words, but that was pretty much it. Sorcerers were ostracized even in Rosemarie's native, devout country of Volland. Even when she was still in Volland, sorcerers' overall sense of mystery was unsettling to her—a feeling that was no longer with her now.

"Edeltraud, you heard the man. Nothing dangerous will be happening in the church. The knights will be sufficient in keeping guard. I'd appreciate it if you kept on *standby* at the inn."

The clergy members collectively froze at the mention of Edeltraud's name. It seemed the name of the Archmagus of the Magic Nation of Baltzar preceded them all the way to the Holy Land.

"—Okay. Going to *standby* at inn until business done." Edeltraud gave an honest nod.

Still worried about not having the archmagus at their side, they left him where he stood and proceeded into the church. Upon entering, silence descended upon them. The interior design was plain, contrary to expectations. In the middle of the empty hall with the arched ceiling, there was a dark brown spiral staircase. But rather than going up, as one might expect, it spiraled down underground. That was most likely the entrance to the rumored underground cathedral. The only decoration to speak of was the vibrant tapestry adorning the stark white stucco wall, which featured a deformed beast with the upper half of a horse and the lower half of a fish.

The cardinal said, "If you'd be so kind as to wait right here for a second," before going over to the clergymen, who all stood next to each other in something of a rush.

Anxiety loosened its grip on Rosemarie ever so slightly and allowed her to breathe a little more easily. She stared intently at the tapestry. Each individual hair, each individual scale, was stitched intricately into the material.

"It's the sacred beast, Hippocampus. You've seen paintings of it before, haven't you?"

"I have. It's also called The Guardian of the Sea. It's quite odd to see it adorning the walls of the house of God..."

"Well, this is a seaside town. They even have legends saying that

the Hippocampus produces salt.”

One would have thought that a church in the Holy Land would ban revering anything other than God. Perhaps, considering the locale’s tie to the sea, it was treated as more of a likely story. Rosemarie tilted her head and pondered, suddenly realizing how gloomy Fritz looked. Claudio, who was just next to her, probably noticed it, too. He squinted suspiciously.

“What’s wrong? Why are you looking so perplexed?”

“Well, I was just thinking about how different it is from the church I know. It may have been a few years since I’ve been here, but it was never this quiet during the Sacred Relic Worship. They keep getting people on the pilgrimage, so the church is always open. Not a soul being around outside of the members of the clergy is downright odd,” the normally aloof Fritz declared in a serious tone. He cast a suspicious eye toward the cardinals and clergymen, who were conversing amongst themselves some distance away.

“It’s because they have a deformed visitor in their midst, isn’t it? Probably something they don’t want to subject the regular worshipers to.”

“That’s not great, but I sure do hope that’s the case we’re dealing with here.” Fritz didn’t seem satisfied with that answer, but with the cardinal coming back after some discussion with his peers, he immediately took a step back and took his spot at the rear.

“Terribly sorry for the wait. The caretaker in charge of attending to you and your party will be here any—”

“Here I am, Your Eminence. I was just making a final check of the room I shall be escorting you all to.” A nonchalant voice was heard coming from the staircase leading downstairs, and out stepped a lone young man.

He was of slim build, with long white hair tied into a braid hanging down his back. He gave off a certain impression. To put it lightly, he seemed fragile; to put it harshly, he looked like he might well become the first person ever to develop tuberculosis from a common cold. His neat features weren’t exactly chiseled, but gave off a tranquil aura, nonetheless. He also had a sharp, seemingly resentful look in his eyes, but his face remained human. That fact relieved Rosemarie, but instantly brought up suspicion.

(Normally, someone scowling that hard should have a beast head to me, but...)

She pondered to herself as the white-haired man came right up beside them, without so much as the sound of a footstep catching their attention.

“I am pleased to meet you. My name is Ilse Lancel. I serve here as a bishop. Please, if there are any issues that come up during your stay,

feel free to ask me.” The man recited the rather routine greeting without pause—and that was when it happened.

His sharp gaze remained as-is, but his mouth stretched considerably to either side and morphed into a wide, dusky yellow-orange beak. His snow white hair transformed before Rosemarie’s eyes into soft-looking gray feathers devoid of any luster. The frail young man with a menacing look in his eyes, who introduced himself as Ilse, has metamorphosed into a bird with a rather attractive plumage poking out from the back of his head. She felt like she had seen this type of bird in a book, but she couldn’t recall the name right away.

It put her mind a little more at ease rather than scaring her. Considering she even saw Claudio as a Silver Lion, she didn’t want her vision to go any more screwy than it already was.

“From here on, I, Ilse, shall be escorting you. Please, this way,” the gray bird-headed young man said in a curt-sounding, business-like tone as he turned away from them.

Claudio descended the spiral staircase after Ilse, and Rosemarie followed. As she did, she cast her eyes back toward the hall. There, she caught sight of the cardinal and the other clergymen, their heads once again human. The looks of relief on all their faces irritated Rosemarie, and drew a tiny sigh out of her.

“This is the chapel dedicated to Saint Kamil. It is the largest chapel in the church,” Ilse, their gray bird-headed caretaker, informed them in his typical indifferent tone—a tone that betrayed just how many millions of times he’d given this same explanation.

Climbing down the entirety of the spiral staircase was akin to falling down to the bottom of a well. Once at the bottom, they navigated through the complex, anthill-like passageways and took a staircase leading even farther down. Suddenly, they found themselves walking into a wide-open area.

The ceiling in the room was so high that there was enough room for a second floor, unlike the low-hanging ceilings of the passageways they had walked through up until now. The multitude of lit candles placed in the several chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling served to cast a whimsical light over the chapel. A countless number of white wooden frames intertwined for structural integrity made the church seem more like an ancient temple—it was wrought with mysticism. Judging from the simplistic building on the surface above, one would never imagine this sublime area existed beneath it.

“Are the sculptures on the wall made of salt?” While Rosemarie stood speechless and overwhelmed, Claudio spoke up, his surprise slightly coming through in his tone.

Carved on walls to the left and right was the tale of how Saint Kamil discovered the rock salt after receiving word from God. And, upon further inspection, the reason it sparkled under the candlelight was because it was, indeed, rock salt.

Ilse heard the question. His face had already returned to human form, but that menacing stare and stoic look on his face remained. He didn't seem scary right now, but he was an enigma of a bishop, nonetheless; it was hard to get a bead on what he might be thinking about.

"Yes, sir. Everything in this chapel is constructed out of rock salt. The sculptures on the wall, the altar, the statues of Saint Kamil, and even the chandeliers above us."

Upon hearing "chandeliers above us," Rosemarie immediately looked up. She was taken aback, as the chandeliers appeared to be undeniably made out of crystal.

"Heidi, my elder sister said it was absolutely stupendous, didn't she?" Rosemarie asked the maid, who stood discreetly behind her.

"Indeed she did, Princess. I never would have thought that I, too, would be able to feast my eyes on this. Does it not make you want to give it a lick to test if it actually is salt? Just a *teensy weensy* bit?"

At Heidi's answer, Rosemarie's lips curled into a smile. She had been so worried and afraid about going outside, but now that she was actually out and about, she was able to see things she had never seen before like this.

"Find something interesting? Bishop Lancel said that he would show us to our rooms." After listening to Ilse's introduction of the chapel, Claudio fell back to Rosemarie.

"Um, before he does, would you mind if I were to offer a prayer at the saint's altar?"

"That's fine. I don't mind." Claudio happily nodded in confirmation, so Rosemarie walked over to the altar with Heidi in tow. She folded her hands, prayed silently, and lifted her head. Once she did, she spotted a statue of a Hippocampus kneeling at the feet of the statue of the saint set behind the altar.

(It's *here*, too...? Wait... Huh?)

She felt a sudden buzzing in her ears. Then, an ear-piercing sound echoed through her head. However, scanning her area didn't give her an idea of where the sound was coming from. She turned around to Heidi with her hands over her ears, but her face didn't show anything out of the ordinary.

"Um, do you hear something? It's almost like an animal's cry..."

"No, I don't hear anything." Claudio, who was waiting with arms folded some distance away so as not to disturb her prayer, shook his head. Neither Alto nor Fritz, standing at attention near the entrance,

showed any signs of suspicion. However, Ilse opened his mouth with confidence as if it were a matter of fact.

“That is the sound of the wind. As you can see, this church utilizes tunnels and the complex terrain, so there are also vents open almost everywhere. We are on the third level from the surface. We cannot descend to the tenth level, the deepest level, because of the recent staircase collapse, but it’s said to be connected to the ocean, meaning that air is bound to pass through.”

“Sound of the wind...?” She focused her ears, but she didn’t hear a thing anymore. As concerning as it was, Ilse might have been right. She settled herself with that thought as she walked to the guest rooms per Ilse’s escort.

They passed through a narrow passageway on their way to the fourth floor, which housed the guest rooms. All along that passageway were several sculptures, serving as a treat for the eyes.

“As I said before, the church has quite a complicated layout, so it is easy to end up lost. When you exit the room, please pull the bell cord on the wall and call for me.” Ilse then told them he would return once it was time for dinner, and made his exit. Once he left the room, Rosemarie let out an exhausted sigh.

The guest room was about as wide as the lounge in Rosemarie’s quarters in Baltzar, and it didn’t even seem as though they were underground. The bedroom was apparently the adjacent room. Inside, there was no sign of a bed, but there was furniture like a couch, a single-seat sofa, and a table. The walls, like the passageways and chapel, were lined with engravings—these being of dainty flowers. And on the wall in the middle of the room, as expected, was another tapestry of a Hippocampus.

“Are you tired? Rest yourself here for a bit. I’m going to go discuss plans with the people I left above. Fritz, you must know the way if you’ve been here in the past, right? Lead the way. Alto, you stay on guard duty.” Claudio dished out orders and then tried to exit the room without a moment’s repose, but Rosemarie scrambled to her feet.

“Um, I will come along with you. I swear I will not get in your way. I believe that you’ll find it harder to tire if I am with you... Also, I feel uneasy being left behind.” Claudio wouldn’t admit to being tired even if he was, so the idea of him leaving her behind and passing out somewhere without her around filled her with worry.

She stared straight into Claudio’s beastly eyes. For reasons known only to himself, he winced and turned his face away.

“No, please stay here. Fritz said that the inside of the church seemed odd earlier. It may be a pointless concern, but if anything should happen to you, it’ll steal my mana. If you don’t want to inconvenience me, then stay right here. Understood?” Claudio

declared in a rushed tone, turning around at a smart pace and exiting the room in the blink of an eye.

“Wait, Your Highness! Um, Your Royal Wifeness? Pay that last comment no mind and just sit tight until we get back, okay? Okay.” Fritz said with a wry smile before chasing after Claudio. Alto then followed suit, saluting apologetically and informing her that he would be taking his post outside the door before excusing himself from the room.

The three made such hasty retreats that Rosemarie lost her chance to get a word in edgewise. She slumped her shoulders.

“Heidi, did I happen to overstep my boundaries with my remarks?”

“No, not at all, milady. Prince Claudio has his own take on things. It’s also a matter of you not explaining yourself quite enough, princess. You know what I mean. It’s his usual bad habit.” Heidi declared with a sweet grin as Rosemarie looked at her, perplexed, but she thought back on it. His bad habit—in order to keep firm to his opinion, he would speak in a sharp and biting manner. Changing her mind and getting back her composure, she sighed deeply.

Claudio exited the guest room and walked down the white passageway engraved with scenes of God with the plants and animals of the world. But after getting a decent way along, he stopped in his tracks. He leaned himself and his head against the wall and covered his face with his hand.

“God, give me a break...”

“That little stunt is bound to give her the wrong impression. I mean, *come on*, you *know* you shouldn’t be running away.”

As soon as he heard that sarcastic quip from Fritz, who had caught up to him, he sighed deeply. “I’m not running because I *want* to run.”

“Is it because you feel the urge to get involved with her and that’d be a problem? Even if you did, I don’t think it would be.”

Claudio threw a glare Fritz’s way. Why was he trying to make it all sound so simple?

“It would be for Rosemarie. She would lose her chance to go back to Volland even after returning my mana.” As long as he kept himself away, divorce wouldn’t be a messy process. Right now, at this point, he didn’t want to deprive her of hope.

“You were never serious about letting her go back home and you know it. I’d say Her Royal Wifeness is wrapped up with one hell of a difficult and picky man, wouldn’t you agree?”

Fritz offered a suggestive smile. Claudio smiled back sarcastically in response, proceeding to walk on; but, knowing he was leading the

way, Fritz made his way in front of Claudio to do just that.

“My name is Adelina. I have been assigned by His Reverence Ilse Lancel as your personal chambermaid. I have brought you some lustral holy water.” Briskly introducing herself to Rosemarie was a young girl about a year or two younger than her, with a full head of chestnut-colored hair tied into two braided pigtails. Her big, brown, and somewhat almond-shaped eyes were shaking with tension. Rosemarie felt a chill, afraid that the girl might just drop the goblet sitting atop the tray in her hands.

Rosemarie had been unpacking with Heidi ever since Claudio left to attend to matters, and it was about when they were finishing up the last of the luggage that the young girl dropped by the room.

“I appreciate your efforts, Lady Adelina.”

“Please, Adelina alone will be fine, milady. I am a simple chambermaid, so neither titles nor formalities will be necessary.” The girl flashed Rosemarie a sprightly smile, compelling Rosemarie to return the smile. Her general impression seemed apt at cheering Rosemarie up, turning any frowns upside down. She also slightly resembled her younger sister in Volland in some respects.

“In that case, um, Adelina? What is this ‘lustral holy water’ exactly?”

“It is water purified with the Sacred Relic. Everyone who stays in the church is treated to it. Please, partake to cleanse your body.”

The word ‘Sacred Relic’ sparked Rosemarie’s memory. That relic was supposed to be able to turn seawater into fresh water, so maybe this was the real-life product.

“Okay, I will, then. I’ll have some later. Thank you for bringing it over.”

“Think nothing of it; you needn’t thank me. Oh, but, um...” Adelina placed the tray on the table and suddenly started to stammer. Her eyes then darted around the room as if searching for something. Within a few seconds, her face was covered in short orange hair. A small pair of rounded ears and circular eyes later, her face had finished morphing into that of a weasel. Upon seeing Adelina like this, Rosemarie found herself a tad nervous, but she quickly figured out what the girl was searching for.

“If you’re looking for Prince Claudio, he’s already stepped out, so you don’t need to be so afraid.”

“Oh! Oh dear,ahaha, my apologies.” Adelina let out a sigh in relief, but her face remained as a weasel. While she was very aware that fear wasn’t something that was so easily wiped clean, it still brought her down, nonetheless.

“Well, I can’t blame you for being afraid. Was there something you needed to tell Prince Claudio?”

“No, nothing. I was simply directed by His Reverence Ilse to greet and introduce myself since I will be in and out doing cleaning and such. Oh, more importantly, I see that you have already taken care of your luggage, but do you happen to need help with anything else?” Adelina scrambled to smooth things over, asking the question with her back straight just like a real weasel. Seeing this, Rosemarie decided not to pry anymore and turned back to Heidi.

“We’re fine here, right?”

“Yes, I would say so. We’re just about finished up here anyway.”

Upon hearing Heidi’s reply, Adelina gave a tiny nod. “In that case, I will excuse myself. I will be back again if needed.”

Perhaps thanks to the relief of having the formalities squared away, her face quickly reverted back from weasel to human form. Adelina clasped her hands in front of her and performed a crisp bow, and that was when Rosemarie noticed her braid coming undone.

“Wait. Your hair is coming loose. —Okay, that should do it. Your hair is so beautiful.” She reached out and rebraided her hair, causing Adelina to freeze up with eyes wide open.

“I’m sorry to have startled you. You remind me so much of my younger sister, I couldn’t help but...”

“I-I’m sorry to inconvenience you like that. Thank you very much.” Adelina hastily bowed this time around, opened the door, and was about to step out of the room; but she shook her head like she was trying to break something up and turned back around to face Rosemarie—her face had morphed back into a weasel. Rosemarie braced herself for whatever the girl had to say to her.

“Um... Did you happen to feel a sense of discomfort once you entered this church?”

“Discomfort? Well, Father Fritz—that is to say, the clergyman we brought with us from Baltzar—he mentioned something about things being oddly quiet here considering the occasion, but...” Perhaps this meant that Fritz’s guess was right? It was a question that left her with a bad feeling, which drove her to clutch her Kaola pendant.

“Yes, well, you see... That is because they are currently limiting who is allowed entry into the church,” Adelina informed them in a constrained voice. Rosemarie, bewildered, stared at Heidi and vice-versa.

“This might be quite unsettling to hear... But the truth is, I’ve heard that, yesterday, there was a mouse carcass left on the alter of the chapel devoted to our great saint.”

Rosemarie was taken aback in shock. That was the very same chapel of Saint Kamil she saw not even a few minutes ago. There was

no trace of any of that back then, nor had Ilse made a single mention of it.

“While there is a cat that catches rodents around, the way this particular mouse died was special in that...” Perhaps hesitant to finish her sentence, Adelina bit her lip for a second. Seeing her so hesitant stirred up uneasiness, signaling that she didn’t want to hear anymore—that she wanted to just avoid the subject—and she unconsciously rubbed at goosebumps on her arm.

“They say both of its eyes were missing—gouged out...”

“...?!” Rosemarie quickly clasped her mouth. While her heart ached for the creature, shivers still went down her spine. That was definitely no cat’s handiwork.

“Lady Adelina, that might be a tad *too* graphic for the princess...” Heidi spoke up in a slightly disparaging tone, placing her hands softly upon Rosemarie’s shoulders to keep her steady.

Adelina gasped and bowed her head in apology. “Please forgive me for bringing this subject up. However, since they still haven’t found the culprit, I do think it would be best to limit any walking around by yourself to a minimum,” she pressed, probably out of the kindness of her heart. She herself was likely afraid, too. The weasel head proved that.

“...I appreciate the warning. Don’t forget to take care of yourself as well.” Rosemarie felt her face flinch as she tried to fight back the nausea lodged in her throat, but she managed to straighten it out into a smile.

Adelina actually did take her leave this time. Upon which, Rosemarie turned her back on the door in silence.

“Princess? Are you all right?”

Rosemarie ignored Heidi’s anxious question and dashed to the bedroom on unsteady footing. She then placed her trusty bucket, lying near her pillow, over her head and doubled over where she stood.

(A mouse’s eyes gouged out of its skull is far too frightening...! What is going on here? These are Holy Land, right? *Right?*) She shivered horribly as she squeezed at the edges of the bucket.

Not even in Baltzar, where psychological warfare was a part of everyday affairs, had an incident this unsettling and sadistic ever occurred. The fact that it happened in the Holy Land made it feel all the more abnormal and terrifying.

After cowering in fear for who-knows-how-long, a certain fact sprung into Rosemarie’s mind, snapping her back to her senses.

(Oh, should I let Prince Claudio know about this? After all, Father Fritz was also concerned about it... And waiting for something *else* to happen would be too late. Yes, I have to go and tell them.)

This was no time to quake in her boots. Her best course of action

here was to inform them as quickly as possible.

Once she came to that realization, her shivering calmed down as if it had never happened. She really *didn't* fear anything so long as she was doing something for Claudio's sake. Taking a huge breath to encourage herself, she quickly rose to her feet—

Which was when...

“—!!”

“Yow...?!” The sudden shock to the back of her head forced Rosemarie back to a crouch.

(Ouch... I feel like I've had this happen once before...)

Despite her eyes tearing up and fighting back the pain, she turned herself around and softly pushed up her bucket to see—her husband. She didn't know when he got back, but he was there, squatting and clutching at his jaw with his hands.

“Prince Claudio!” She abandoned her bucket and turned pale in the face as she awkwardly ran over to Claudio, but Claudio stuck out one hand while holding to his jaw with the other. He still had his Silver Lion face, but tears were clearly forming in his eyes, meaning that he was in some considerable pain.

“Are you telling me to stay back? I'm so sorry! I didn't realize that you were in the room... Um, my guess is it hurts... *a lot*... right?” Her body was drawing a cold sweat, but her heart held concern for his well-being, so she inched her way over to him. As soon as she did, Claudio finished pressing on his jaw and spoke up.

“...That's it. Seriously. Put the damn bucket into the storage trunk. Right this instant. That thing is a deadly weapon.”

“Yes, sir...” She hurried to pick up her abandoned bucket and packed it into the storage trunk, still open from being unpacked earlier. Claudio took a seat on the bed while nursing his jaw—perhaps the force of the impact having passed in the meantime.

“Did it leave a bruise? I am so, so sorry...”

“I'm fine. And, no. No bruises. I can't believe you would pick *that* opportunity to spring up. I swear, when it comes to you, I never know *what* is on the horizon,” he said with a long sigh, a sound which made Rosemarie do nothing but reflect on her misdeed. Claudio broke that up by telling her to sit down, however, and she did, taking a seat on the bed—albeit in an awkward, timid manner.

“Heidi told me. She said that a chambermaid told you some disturbing news.”

“...Yes. That is why I figured that I should inform you as quickly as possible, but, well...” Not only was she not able to go inform him, but she almost ended up causing him injury. She'd expended a little bit of effort, and look at what had happened. It was pathetic. Absolutely pathetic.

“Quit panicking. I had heard about that a little earlier through one of Fritz’s acquaintances. I’m glad you made an attempt to fill me in. But I hope this at least helped you see why you shouldn’t rush into action.”

“Yes, I’ll be more careful of my surroundings,” she replied, nodding in shame. Claudio seemed to give her a dry smile in return, showing a bit of his sharp fangs. He then reached out and stroked the back of her head.

“You’re not hurt, are you?”

“I was in pain when we collided, but not anymore... Why? Did I get a bump on my head?”

“No, no bumps. You’re hardheaded in more ways than one,” he quipped. Rosemarie bristled.

“Well, Prince Claudio, I’d say your jaw is mighty sturdy, considering my hard head slammed into it without cracking it.” As a means of payback, Rosemarie stroked the underside of Claudio’s jaw, as though she were tickling a cat’s chin. The texture was softer and fluffier than his mane, and it was actually starting to calm her down.

“...! Wait. Don’t tickle me. Stop. I’m not a cat.” He grabbed her hand to force her to stop, but the action also threw her off balance, making her fall against Claudio’s chest. As she hurriedly attempted to separate herself from him, her close-up view of the Silver Lion head made her heart jump. His facial expressions should have been harder to make out in comparison to his human face. Even so, she could see that he was smiling fiercely.

“You have a lot of nerve, treating me like some pet. Actually... that reminds me. I never had a chance to try this under these conditions.”

Before she could ask what he meant, Claudio trailed the back of his finger softly over Rosemarie’s lips. Shivers went down her spine as a result. This sensation confused her. It wasn’t fear, but it made her body tense up all the same.

“Do I frighten you, Rosemarie?”

The verbiage was somewhat different, but it was a question that she heard a few times before. She had no idea what his mindset behind asking the question was, but she always gave the same answer.

“—You do not,” she stated clearly, staring straight into Claudio’s pair of blue eyes. That was when she realized that Claudio’s eyes were similar in shade to the ocean she was so unfamiliar with. Those deep and still eyes slowly drew near her.

(Is he going to... kiss me...?)

His fingers were intertwined with hers and his arm was wrapped around her back, but she noticed that they were gripping so loosely that she could quickly shake them both off and make an escape. That

loose hold almost seemed to be saying, “If you don’t like this, run away.” It put a strain on her heart.

(He might be trying to test me.)

She got dizzy with anxiety and collapsed when Edeltraud forced the two of them into a kiss. Maybe he was testing her to see if she really wasn’t frightened of him, but the mere suspicion that Claudio couldn’t trust her made her heart ache.

While kissing to return his mana was embarrassing, she in no way disliked it. She enjoyed chatting and holding hands to stabilize his condition and she looked up to Claudio’s positive disposition very much. There were times where being next to him would send her heart into an uncontrollable frenzy, but it still brought her joy. It wasn’t because she needed to be with him out of obligation for stealing his mana. It was simply because being with him was something that she—

(Loved... Do I... love Prince Claudio?)

That feeling plopped itself into the center of her chest.

Just as she said on the hill overlooking the Holy Land, she didn’t care whether his face was human or beast. He was a hard worker, a bit mean at times, and he possessed many things that she herself did not—and she loved Claudio for all those reasons.

That was why she wanted him to believe her, even if she couldn’t confess that aloud.

She returned the grip Claudio had on her hand and slowly closed her eyes. The fact that she didn’t pass out at the inquiry when they kissed remained a mystery to this date.

Claudio froze in place for a split second, but he softly squeezed the arm that he had wrapped around her back. His whiskers, which were much more solid than his mane, poked her cheeks.

(Huh? But, hold on. Where exactly *are* a lion’s lips?)

Nervous as she was, her thoughts started heading in an odd direction—but those thoughts were interrupted by something plopping onto her shoulder. That same something crawled all over her back and the nape of her neck.

“Oh, God! W-What is it?!” Partially pushing Claudio away, she reached behind herself to check her back. However, once she did, the mystery creature traveled along her arm and jumped at the Kaola pendant hanging over her chest.

“Huh? The squirrel?! How did it get here...? Oh, no. Prince Claudio! You mustn’t crush it in your hands!”

The flying squirrel launched into a fury of protesting squeaks as Claudio grabbed it by its tiny head and pulled it off Rosemarie. His hand looked liable to squeeze down at any moment, so Rosemarie rushed to cling to his arm in an attempt to restrain him.

“—Ow! Why, you little...!”

The squirrel took the opportunity to bite Claudio's hand and make its escape. Then, it fled right out the still-open bedroom door.

“Eeek! What is going on?!” Heidi shrieked while the others panicked.

“Huh?! What is this? Wait, Master Edel, if you use magic here, then—Alto, close the door now!” *Ka-shunk*, went the sound of falling metal, along with the sound of something heavy dropping coming from the lounge area.

The overall silence that occupied the area was shattered in grand fashion. Rosemarie, accompanied by Claudio, timidly peeked into the adjacent room that was now astir. Her face stiffened at the chaotic scene that was laid before her.

“H-Heidi, are you okay?”

The couch and sofa were toppled over, and the tapestry had dropped to the floor as if blown over by a sudden gust of gale-force wind. The vase of late-blooming lilies that once sat atop the elegant chest of drawers was smashed, the flowers scattered all over the place. To top it off, the goblet of holy water Adelina had brought earlier had been knocked over, leaving a wet spot on the carpet. The situation's only saving grace was that the goblet itself remained intact, if only because it was made of metal.

Heidi clung to the wall, practically terrified, her face stiff and tense. Rosemarie ran up next to her, looking her in the eyes.

“I am all right. Just a little startled, that's all. Oh, princess, that vase has shattered, so please watch your step,” Heidi said, smiling and relieved as she glanced over to the corner of the room. Fritz and Alto stood nearby, focused on the same corner. At their feet was someone squatting on their knees.

“Did you catch it?” Claudio asked as the two turned around with rather troubled grins.

The individual in front of the two rose to their feet and turned around as well. In their hands sat the squirrel thrashing around within a familiar glass orb—one which Rosemarie recalled being trapped in some time before.

However, that fact aside, Rosemarie found herself puzzled at the individual holding the orb containing the squirrel.

It was a young boy around the same age as her—around sixteen or seventeen. His short white hair was scraggly and his drowsy-looking blue eyes seemed likely to close at any moment. Perhaps because his face bore no distinguishable expression, he resembled a doll more than he did a living human. He was clad in gaudy priest's garb decorated in gold trimmings, so he was probably a clergyman.



Just when she wondered who this mystery boy could have been, she heard his emotionless voice.

“Caught it. But it’s angry.”

That terse speech pattern coupled with that languid, monotone voice—That all-too familiar pair made Rosemarie stare in disbelief.

“Could you possibly be... Mage Edel?!” asked Rosemarie, astonished, as all eyes fell upon her.

The white-haired youth looked back, cocking their head in confusion. “I am. Volland Princess, why are you asking now? Late to the party.”

“Wait, are you saying you’ve never seen Master Edel’s face before?” Claudio asked, surprised. Rosemarie nodded fiercely in reply.

“Not even once. I was convinced he was much older than me... Huh? Mage Edel, just how old are you?”

She was told that the guard before Edeltraud retired when Claudio’s father took the throne as current king of Baltzar. That was about fifteen years ago. Which would mean that Edeltraud was pushing thirty, at the youngest. But judging from their appearance, that was simply impossible.

“You know sorcerer’s appearance and age are different, right?”

“Sorcerers age more slowly because of their mana. Given that, Master Edel is even older than Fritz.”

Her naive doubts were instantly extinguished through Edeltraud’s and Claudio’s combined efforts, but she looked at the boy closely, even though she knew it was rude of her to be doubtful.

She had always assumed that they kept their face half-covered by the indigo hood of their cloak to hide some sort of scar, or something to that effect. But that wasn’t the case at all. What was the reason for them to hide it, then?

“Um, is there some sort of rule that states that the guard of the Forbidden Forest must hide their face?”

“No rule. But, you become guard, you age even more leniently. Look even younger than a normal sorcerer, so get disrespected; it’s annoying. That’s why everyone usually wears one.” Edeltraud sighed, evidently bothered. If that was all true, they likely didn’t even *want* to wear the hood.

“I see... But why are you here, Mage Edel? Sorcerers weren’t allowed in, I thought...”

“Archmagus Edeltraud is on *standby* at inn. Claudio’s personal aide, Clergyman Edel, should have no problems,” Edeltraud declared unapologetically with an unflinching expression.

Back when the cardinal told them that sorcerers weren’t allowed into the church, Rosemarie recalled the exchange between Claudio

and Edeltraud where he put odd emphasis on the word “standby,” which made it all click.

“If they aren’t banning entry because of mana, then I don’t see any need to comply with them, do you?”

She found herself shocked at Claudio’s tone, which she could easily imagine accompanied with an audacious smile. But knowing a disturbing incident was afoot and *not* knowing what was looming around the corner, she felt this just might work out. His comment aside, having Edeltraud there was all the more assuring.

“Well, leaving matters with Master Edel as they are... Our flying squirrel friend here is the same one who came flying at us on the hill where we took that break, isn’t it?”

“I believe that it is. That squirrel also had a silver flower emblem on its forehead... It must have smuggled its way into our luggage. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to give it that cookie, after all...”

She fixed her eyes on the silver flower emblem on the thrashing squirrel’s forehead. Considering she thought it was a strange pattern for a flying squirrel to have, she remembered it well. No way were there two with this same mark.

Rosemarie went over to look into the orb. As she did so, her Kaola pendant clanked against the glass. Just as it did, the squirrel mellowed out, snapping back into its senses. Its large eyes widened and it seemed to be staring at the pendant.

(It’s reacting to the Kaola...?)

As a test, she swung the pendant and the squirrel once again swayed its body left and right. Did it really want this seed that badly?

“Alto, sorry, but could you let that thing loose outside?”

“Right away, sir,” was Alto’s succinct reply to Claudio’s request. As he tried to take the glass orb from Edeltraud, it cracked and popped open like a bubble bursting.

By the time they could process what was going on, it was too late. The squirrel had run up the length of Edeltraud’s arm and taken a leap off their head.

“It went that way, Father Fritz!” Alto frantically shouted. In response, Fritz picked up the tapestry on the floor, spread it out wide, and stood at the ready. However, the squirrel nimbly avoided it and slipped into one of the drawers of the toppled chest of drawers.

“Aah, damn, it went inside...” Before Claudio could drag it out by force, Rosemarie stepped in from the side.

“Prince Claudio, allow me.”

She stooped in front of the chest of drawers, took off her Kaola pendant, and flashed it in front of the drawer where the squirrel was hiding. Since it showed a peculiar interest in it a second ago, it wasn’t too far-fetched to believe that it might come out.

The squirrel warily produced a couple of tiny squeaks, but eventually deemed it safe to come out and jumped at Rosemarie. However, her relief was short-lived as something rolled out along with it. Claudio, standing beside her, picked it up.

“A jewel? Did someone lose this?”

It was a dark red jewel as vibrant as the sky at twilight. Within it were several finely-shaved pieces of gold. As she stared at it, Rosemarie found herself getting dizzy from the deep, rich color, and closed her eyes. That was when it happened—that was when her ears heard the sound of wind blowing.

(—!! The same sound I heard in the saint’s chapel?)

It was definitely the same ear-splitting sound from before. Did that mean that you could hear it all the way down here, too?

She opened her eyes in a panic, only to discover that the sound had disappeared without a trace. Claudio didn’t seem to notice anything. He was squinting at the jewel, not questioning a thing.

“Quite unusual. I’ve never seen a jewel of this color with gold shavings in it.”

“Gold shavings?” Fritz, who was in the middle of reaffixing the tapestry to the wall, suddenly turned around in suspicion.

“Wait a second. Did you just say ‘a jewel with gold shavings?’” Fritz rushed over for no discernible reason. Claudio then passed the jewel over to him, baffled.

“What?! But, this is... For Heaven’s sake, what in blue blazes is this doing here? This doesn’t spell good news,” Fritz said, frowning and going pale in the face.

“Because this is—probably the Sacred Relic.”

“What did you just say? Are you certain?” Claudio questioned, the knot forming on his forehead evident despite his beastly face. Rosemarie also stared at the jewel and found herself speechless.

“Hmm, well, it has been a few years since I’ve seen the genuine article myself, so I don’t have that much confidence. I’d call it a definite ‘maybe.’ I can’t imagine there being another jewel as rare and unusual as this one, after all.”

“Show me, Fritz Belc.”

After Fritz had scrutinized the jewel, he gave a pathetic smile and handed it over to Edeltraud upon their request.

“If that were the Sacred Relic, then what would it be doing here of all places...?” Rosemarie asked, voicing the most obvious concern, but was met with silence as no one in the room knew what they should say. The only thing they did know was that, if they didn’t play their cards right, they would undoubtedly be suspected of theft. Not to mention, this also had implications that someone was trying to set all of them up.

“I’ll hold onto it for the time being, Master Edel. Fritz, try casually asking your acquaintance whether any disturbances are about.” Claudio sighed deeply, holding a hand out toward Edeltraud.

With a solemn expression, Fritz agreed and quickly left the room. Edeltraud handed over the jewel to Claudio, clearly perplexed despite their lack of expression.

“Claudio, I can feel mana from that.”

“Mana? Then, does that mean this isn’t the Sacred Relic?”

“Don’t know. Don’t know what makes Sacred Relic what it is, so can’t say either way.”

Upon listening to Edeltraud’s words, Claudio folded his arms in contemplation for a bit before finally lifting his head.

—“I suppose we’ll do a little wait-and-seeing. We may not know if this is the Sacred Relic or some sort of forgery, but so long as we don’t have any clues as to who perpetrated this and why, we’re better off not doing anything ill-advised.”

Edeltraud and Alto both nodded; Rosemarie did, too, albeit a bit more emphatically. She then took a breath and finally looked down at the flying squirrel still clinging to her. It was so docile it made all that thrashing it did earlier seem like it never happened. She softly stroked its back. It squinted and smiled, enraptured.

“Ah, right. We have to put that thing outside.” Claudio put a hand out for the squirrel, but it puffed itself up threateningly. Rosemarie’s eyebrows dropped helplessly.

“I will go release it outside. Prince Claudio, it would be best if you didn’t mess with it...”

“Volland Princess, that is being attracted by Kaola. Even if you release it, it’ll come right back.”

Rosemarie’s eyes opened upon hearing Edeltraud’s news. Given the fact that she fished it out of the chest of drawers among other things, that seemed to be the case after all.

“Had you, by any chance, already noticed that back on the hill?” She recalled that Edeltraud seemed awfully interested in the squirrel when they released it back into the forest.

“More or less, felt it was odd. It’s not harmful, but best not pry it away. It’s okay. You have Kaola, it stays good.”

What was that supposed to mean? She had the feeling there was something more to his statement. But she couldn’t bring herself to think that the little squirrel dozing off on her was that dangerous, so she reserved her comments.

“That leaves us with no choice. We’ll just have to leave it with the Kaola in the forest when we bring it back. We only came here to meet the old guard under the guise of visiting for the Sacred Relic Worship, but between our resident rodent problem and Sacred Relics falling

into our laps, it looks like we're going to be finding ourselves in quite the cumbersome ordeal."

Looking up at Claudio as he tensed his brow, Rosemarie sighed slightly, thinking that she'd probably piled another issue on top of the already towering stack of problems.

Chapter 3: The Labyrinthine Workings of the Church

The clamor of the people echoed throughout the room and resonated in her ears.

A series of long tables spanned the spacious dining hall as far as the eye could see. The sheer number of people sitting at them was enough to startle and slightly disturb Rosemarie, causing her to gulp.

Once it was dinnertime, Ilse came and ushered them into the dining hall, which was packed with the various attendees of the Sacred Relic Worship. The fact that she hadn't seen any of them up until that point made her that much more nervous.

There might be even more people arriving before the ceremony five days from now.

"There sure are a lot of people here, aren't there? Princess, will you be okay?" Heidi, who stood by Rosemarie's side to act as her server, whispered in concern as the princess took her seat.

"I'm okay, Heidi. Yes, I'm just fine." Rosemarie managed to smooth her expression over and nod in reply.

(Yes, I *am* fine, but...)

She glanced over at Claudio sitting in the seat beside her.

When they all showed up in the dining hall, the once calm atmosphere froze over in an instant. The heads of the people morphed into beasts so quickly that there was practically an audible *whoosh*, like a receding wave. Rosemarie, upon seeing this, clenched her chest less in fear and more in frustration.

Since they disregarded status and everyone was being treated equally, there were no designated seats. Once Ilse told Claudio that, he stationed himself all the way in the back of the dining hall, possibly out of consideration for the people around him. The dining hall as a whole was brightly lit, but the light didn't really travel to the corner of the room. The shadows were helping out Claudio by making him look less conspicuous.

Nevertheless, impolite stares came sticking at them from all over the hall—astonishment, fear, contempt, all of it. She felt like it was puncturing a hole in her stomach.

(This might be even *worse* than Baltzar...) Even though Claudio's appearance was known to the aristocrats of Baltzar and the people around the royal capital, that wasn't how it worked in other countries.

Although there was a collection of guests from different nations, there were naturally people who had never seen Claudio's appearance before.

"Well, this is quite a fresh change of pace."

She couldn't tell what expression he was making, but Claudio seemed to be amused by the people staring at him and not worried about them at all, which put Rosemarie's mind at ease.

"You being so confident and upright is helping me settle my own nerves, Prince Claudio."

"Is that so? Don't overwhelm yourself. You're going pale in the face." Claudio stroked Rosemarie's cheek, perhaps in an attempt to help warm it up. The moment his finger brushed past her lips, she remembered that they were about to kiss before the squirrel attack. Her face flushed almost instantly.

(Huh? Wait a moment. Was *everyone else* in the other room?)

Heidi was *most definitely* there, at the very least. If Claudio had come back to the room then, then the other three had naturally followed him back; that was why things turned out to be utter pandemonium back there.

(God, I cannot show my face to the others! I need my bucket over my head—now...!)

Even if none of them saw the actual scene, the atmosphere alone probably gave them enough information. Just thinking about it was unbelievably embarrassing. With that simmering inside her, she couldn't bring herself to turn and face Heidi, who stood right behind her.

"What's wrong? Now your face is as red as a beet. Are you coming down with a fever?"

"It is your fault, Prince Claudio." And, since it was, she really wished that he would take his hand off of her forehead. Everyone else's dumbfounded stares pained her. Claudio's gesture was so surprising that beast-headed people reverted back to human form in droves.

She looked up reproachfully at Claudio to see the corner of his mouth moving up. She could see a tiny bit of his sharp fangs, and while it seemed like a sign of intimidation, it looked more like a grin to Rosemarie. This was definitely premeditated. He knew this would happen.

She softly brushed away his hand and said, vexed, "Please, don't poke fun at me."

"But, I'm not poking fun at you. I'm just gauging the crowd reactions. There are people whose heads reverted to human, yes?"

"Well, yes, there are, but..."

"There are also some people who've changed their perception of

me due to your reaction. Meaning that the unchanged have an intense sense of hostility. I want to be able to tell the two apart. So don't get all stiff and formal; just act as you normally would."

His idea was deeper than she had expected. It seemed that he wasn't simply doing this for his own amusement. Knowing that to be the case, she felt obliged to cooperate.

(The way I normally would...)

How *would* she normally act around Claudio, anyway? After racking her brain, Rosemarie placed her hand atop of Claudio's pair locked together atop the table.

Claudio's shoulders jolted in surprise. He glanced at her awkwardly before hurrying to pull his hands away.

"I'm sorry. It's something I would normally do, so..." It was something she did on the regular to stabilize his health, so what warranted the reaction he was giving? It almost seemed as if Claudio went on the defensive if Rosemarie took initiative. She didn't think it was a sign of distaste for her, but it had her concerned, nonetheless.

"You—" As soon as Claudio hesitantly started to open his mouth, he sensed someone standing in front of the table.

"Is this seat taken?" asked a girl with an airy voice.

Rosemarie didn't question why someone was coming over to strike up conversation; instead, she looked over to the girl with relief. Across from where they were sitting stood a girl with strawberry blonde hair, accompanied by a girl with what appeared to be the uniform of a maid and the head of a raccoon dog.

Even though they weren't at a dinner party, she was dressed to the nines in a blue dress with an open neckline, of a sort better suited to a gala event. However, the most shocking thing about her was that her head remained human, displaying a positively confident smile, despite the fact that she was face to face with Claudio.

Rosemarie thought that maybe her eyes had cured themselves for a second before realizing that the majority of their onlookers were still beast-headed.

"Feel free," Claudio said warily, nodding with an air of composure. In response, the girl curtsied elegantly and took a seat.

"His Royal Highness, Prince Claudio of Baltzar, I presume? It is an honor to meet you, sir. My name is Suzette, the First Princess of Kavan."

Suzette didn't avert her eyes from the deformed prince for a second. On the contrary, she struck up a friendly conversation, her eyes alight. Rosemarie was even more surprised by that fact, followed by a rather unsettling sense of gloom from within herself.

While someone not showing Claudio the typical disdain should have been a more joyous occasion, Rosemarie noticed that she

somehow couldn't bring herself to rejoice over this. She squeezed her hands in her lap.

(But why can't I? I mean, there is someone else here beside me who doesn't care about his beast head...)

Fritz and Alto, his aides, didn't mind it at all. And while Heidi might be startled on occasion, she didn't look at him with a sense of fear. Nonetheless, she never gave it any thought when it came to any of them.

She managed to curl her lips into a smile, albeit still bewildered. A bowl of soup was placed in front of Claudio as he continued the conversation.

"Kavan is the iron-ore producing country, if not mistaken. Oh, yes, this is my wife, the Crown Princess of—"

"I am so honored that you know of our country. Oh, please, partake in your meal before it gets cold." Cutting off Claudio mid-introduction, Suzette urged him to get started on his dinner. That was when Rosemarie finally realized that this girl had not made eye contact with her even once.

(Is she ignoring me...? Have I done something to offend her? I certainly don't remember ever being acquainted.)

Unlikely, considering she was always shut away in her villa back in Volland. Also, she'd been present at only two galas in Baltzar with visiting royalty—one following her wedding, and one when the Crown Prince and Princess of Rivera made their visit.

"I was not able to attend the evening gala for your birthday celebration, Prince Claudio, so I have been looking forward to having a chance to meet you at long last. I found myself so impatient, in fact, that I ended up rushing to arrive here..." Suzette's cheeks flushed a shade of red. She was referring to the evening gala for Claudio's birthday ceremony—or rather, his bride-selection ceremony. It was also where Rosemarie reunited with Claudio. Considering that gala targeted unengaged daughters of noblemen and princesses, Suzette's absence from it most likely meant she herself was engaged.

(Though, the majority of people at that gala had beast heads on their shoulders...)

They all hated the idea of Claudio falling in love with them at first sight that much. However, when Suzette mentioned wanting to attend the evening gala and meet Claudio, her face was quite human. It was strange for her to show fondness for a man who had a deformed head, let alone a man who was a stranger to her. But she was clearly being honest. If that were the case here, then it was no surprise that she would be jealous of Rosemarie. Rosemarie also couldn't blame the girl for ignoring her with disinterest, given the facts.

That was when it hit her.

Disinterest.

That was the exact emotion that Rosemarie had been holding toward Suzette just a second ago. It wasn't a matter of her not being able to rejoice, it was a matter of her being disinterested in a girl other than herself getting friendly with Claudio.

(Huh? Am *I* being jealous?)

The thought of Claudio opening himself up to this princess, who addressed him with a smile in spite of his beast face, put her on pins and needles.

Her eyes suddenly stopped at Claudio's hand holding his spoon. Imagining that large hand that she touched not even a moment ago touching the cheek of another girl, bringing her close and exchanging a kiss—that mental image was absolutely agonizing, to say the least.

(Is this jealousy? I love Claudio, so I don't want him taken away —)

Feeling stifled, she grabbed at her chest.

"Rosemarie? Are you under the weather?" Claudio's concerned question rang through Rosemarie's ears.

"Eek! No, it isn't right!" She rose to her feet—and, in the process, slammed against the table. A goblet of wine toppled and spilled over, staining Rosemarie's skirt.

"Oh... I-I'm so sorry. Actually, I'm not feeling so well, so I am going to take my leave early." Completely flustered and talking a mile a minute, Rosemarie tried to leave the hall, but Claudio grabbed her arm before she could.

"Wait, I'll leave with you. I'm worried about you collapsing halfway there."

"No, um...! Thank you very much... for that." She tried to shake off his hand and make her escape, but she remembered where she was and constrained herself to a simple reply.

"Princess Suzette, I hate to interrupt our conversation, but my wife has come down with something and we will have to take our leave. Please, enjoy the rest of your meal." Claudio held on to Rosemarie's shoulders for support and turned around, not even waiting for Suzette to reply.

Being practically pushed along, Rosemarie felt an intense glare focused on her and slowly turned her head around. Upon which, she was met with Suzette, her head now that of a long-haired dirty blonde dog, and her killer glare. Rosemarie quickly faced front in a panic.

(S-Scary... I'm sorry. It wasn't on purpose!)

As she left the dining hall while mentally apologizing, Ilse quickly came up to them out of nowhere.

"Was the rabbit soup not to your liking?"

"No, my wife is simply under the weather. I hate to ask, but could

you bring our meal to our room?" Ilse responded to the request with an emotionless nod, and Claudio sped past and out of the dining hall. Although Alto, who was waiting near the door, was surprised at the pair taking such an early leave, he silently followed them.

Fritz had yet to return from his given task. As for Edeltraud, they simply said they were doing some "investigation" before heading off to parts unknown.

Claudio remained silent for some time, but once the coast was clear, he clicked his tongue loudly.

"I swear, what was that woman's problem? She didn't even properly introduce herself."

"Huh? I believe she did, though..."

"To me, she did. However, not only did she not say a word to you, she effectively tried to pretend you weren't even there. No matter how much of a distaste she has for you, that is no way to behave, given the setting," Claudio complained, clearly displeased, while Rosemarie covered her face with both hands.

Apparently, the reason why Claudio followed Rosemarie and excused himself early was because he disliked the way that girl was treating her.

While a part of her thought that she couldn't blame Suzette for her attitude, another part of her couldn't help but be pleased with the turn of events, which made her feel a bit guilty.

"—By the way, you said something 'wasn't right' back there. What wasn't?" Claudio's hands on her shoulders tightened ever so slightly, meaning he probably felt it when she tensed them with a slight start.

"N-N-Nothing at all!"

"If it were nothing, you wouldn't be stuttering so badly—nor would you be blushing right now." Naturally, Claudio figured out that she was perturbed. Rosemarie spun her gears, trying to find something she could say to smooth things over. There was no way that she could be forthright and say what she meant. In fact, she knew she shouldn't.

"Um, well, what was wrong was wrong, which was wrong of me to say!"

"...You know, when you panic, you tend to blurt out the most incomprehensible yet comprehensible things."

She shut her mouth with a gulp. Now that he mentioned it, he probably had a point. She took a tiny breath, regaining her composure after having that unknown facet of herself pointed out to her.

"It is nothing, honestly. I was just thinking to myself and startled myself..." She wasn't telling a lie; she just wasn't telling the whole story.

Claudio looked down at her with doubtful eyes, but he sighed and let go of her shoulders, perhaps knowing that he wasn't going to get

her to talk.

A chill ran down her shoulders the second he let go.

(Prince Claudio simply made me the crown princess in order to return his mana, which I stole from him. And I only married him because he had a human face in a sea of beast heads. I'm sure that Prince Claudio knows that, as well. Even if I am in love with him—)

She wasn't even qualified to utter those words.

Rosemarie softly touched her shoulder, looking at Claudio walking a small distance in front of her.

"Hey... I thought I told you to put that bucket away in the storage trunk. Why have you pulled it back out?" Claudio asked, sighing deeply with arms folded. Rosemarie, bucket in hand, awkwardly turned her eyes away.

"I'm sorry. I just needed something to even out my nerves a bit. After all, I gave my Kaola pendant to that squirrel." Heidi was taking the critter to the servants' quarters right now, so she felt insecure.

"It will only be for a second, so please let me put it o—"

"No, don't put it on. I can only think that something terrible will happen." He tried to pull the bucket from Rosemarie's arms, but she clung to it for dear life.

(No, sleeping in the same bedroom is too much for me to handle!)

After she excused herself from the dining hall and returned to her room, Adelina brought her dinner upon Ilse's request. She ate and took a bath after—all of which was perfectly fine.

However, since there was so much occupying her focus over the course of the day, she failed to realize something—there was only *one* bedroom prepared. Whatever the truth may have been, they were officially a married couple, so it should have been no surprise that they would be put up in the same bedroom.

As soon as Rosemarie realized that she had romantic feelings for Claudio, she was hit with this. It made her so nervous she doubted she could get to sleep.

"Why are you so against sleeping in the same room *now*? We've done this a few times by now, haven't we? And you were fine back then, weren't you?"

"I-I'm not particularly against it, per se... Also, one of those times, I was wearing my bucket in bed."

"—I'm really starting to loathe inanimate objects," Claudio murmured, running a hand through his mane. He proceeded to grab a pillow and turn toward the exit.

"Fine. I'll sleep in the lounge."

"No, you mustn't. You are bound to catch a cold at this time of the

year. I will sleep in the lounge. If I sleep with Momo, then I will not be cold."

"Momo...? Did you name the flying squirrel, the *momonga*, Momo? Wait a blasted second. I'm warmer than some small woodland creature," exclaimed Claudio, igniting an unexpected rivalry against the squirrel. Even so, Rosemarie kept her head still, not nodding in confirmation. Was Claudio telling her to go to sleep holding on to him? That would be simply outrageous.

"—Okay, fine. I get it. You can hug your bucket, but don't wear it. That's how far I'm willing to compromise." Claudio reluctantly gave in, so Rosemarie had no other choice but to nod in confirmation.

She climbed into bed, clutching her bucket. Claudio dimmed the lights before he also got into bed from the opposite side.

Almost as if the squabble they were just having never happened, the room fell completely silent, a fact that was causing Rosemarie to get more and more nervous. Even with her back facing Claudio, she was oddly conscious of even the tiniest rustle that he would make.

"F-Father Fritz still hasn't made his return, has he? I wonder if something has happened." The silence was proving unbearable, so Rosemarie attempted to start a conversation.

"Don't worry." Claudio's response was calm. "He is highly resourceful, so he'll likely make do even if a problem does arise."

"I also wonder when the previous guardsman will show themselves."

"Who really knows? But they will appear at the Worship ceremony. Master Edel said they would search until then."

"If there's anything I could do, then—"

"Rosemarie."

"Yes?"

"Go to sleep." His voice was firm as he told her that, causing Rosemarie's shoulders to jump.

She might have been getting a little annoying.

Pursing her lips, she clutched her bucket. As she tried to calm her nerve-stricken pulse to a manageable level, she shut her eyes tight.

Maybe it was because she was tired, but just before the sandman whisked her away into slumberland, she could have sworn she heard that same sound—the howl of the wind which sounded more like the howl of a beast.

Ka-shunk went the sound of metal hitting on the floor, causing Claudio's eyes to spring open from his rather light sleep.

(What was that sound?)

He kept his ears peeled, but suddenly noticed that Rosemarie was

no longer lying down behind him.

“Rosemarie?”

She seemed to be quite nervous right before going to bed, so he figured that she would have some trouble sleeping. As it turned out, she really was quite tired. Rosemarie went to sleep surprisingly easily. He was at a loss. Not only was he underwhelmed by that, but he was also sulky that he couldn't even get her to notice him.

Thinking that she went to the washroom, Claudio turned around only to be met with surprise.

There was Rosemarie, out of bed and approaching the door with staggering, unsteady steps. He also pieced together that the metallic sound he'd heard a second ago was the sound of her bucket, her so-called extension of herself, dropping to the floor. So far, so good. He was able to follow that much.

However, even though the air was held by autumn's icy grip even while indoors, she went without a robe, and he could see the nape of her white neck from the collar of her thin nightgown. Her head was pointed up toward the ceiling and her eyes were still shut tight behind her thin eyelids. She was clearly asleep, yet her legs were carrying her out the door.

(Is she sleepwalking?)

There was that time when she woke up from her carriage nap and called him a human-faced lion, so he wouldn't put it past her to do something like this.

Claudio reluctantly got up, grabbed a robe, and walked over to Rosemarie's side.

“Where are you going?” He went to put the robe around her slender shoulders and stop her. Unfortunately, she didn't awaken. She shook off Claudio's hand and grabbed the doorknob.

“Hey, open your eyes and wake up.” He shook her shoulders with a little force as if trying to shake off his raised suspicions. However, all it did was cause her head to rock limply back and forth; her eyes weren't opening. Not only that, but she was trying to slip free from Claudio's arms.

(What is this? This is bizarre.)

As he tried to hold her down while she writhed around with unladylike strength, he contemplated calling Edeltraud—that was when it happened.

“...ling. It's calling. I have to go. I have to go. It's calling, I have to go, I have to go, I have to go, it's crying, I have to go.”

Rosemarie deliriously repeated the same few words strung together in a faint voice. Claudio was gripped with horror, but kept a tight hold on her, regardless.

Rosemarie scratched at him in her frenzy as if demanding he let

her go. He was bleeding, but he couldn't let himself be concerned with that now.

"No one is calling you. It's your imagination. You're right here. You're by my side."

"It's crying, it's calling, I have to go, it's crying, return what's important, it's calling—"

"Rosemarie!" He yelled her name in her ear, causing her body to twitch and shiver violently until she eventually went limp and sank into his arms.

Without a moment's repose, there was a noise from the lounge followed by Alto rushing inside, almost busting the bedroom door down.

"Intruders, sir?!" Alto scanned the room with a grim expression, but Claudio spoke up with an immense sense of displeasure.

"No. I *wish* it were an intruder. Rosemarie is acting crazy."

"Whatever has happened to the princess?!" Heidi, who came from behind Alto wielding a candelabra, ran into the bedroom, not even caring that the shawl she was wearing over her sleepwear dropped to the floor. The squirrel sat atop her shoulder the whole time.

"I thought she was just sleepwalking, but she started going berserk, saying, 'It's calling me. I have to go.'"

Claudio laid Rosemarie, who was now in a state that could be considered less asleep and more legitimately unconscious, on the bed and brushed aside the strands of hair over her forehead. Her expression gave no sign that she was in anguish, which was a relief.

"What in blazes would cause the princess to act like a character out of a horror novel like that...?" Despite Heidi's stiffened expression, she dutifully placed the blanket over her mistress. Claudio saw that the squirrel that had come with her was worriedly pacing around Rosemarie's face, but he turned his attention back to Alto.

"Have Fritz and Master Edel come back?"

"Sir. Father Fritz returned not too long ago. He said that he would give you his report tomorrow since you were resting. Mage Edeltraud, on the other hand, has yet to—"

"I'm right here." Slipping past Alto's side, Edeltraud entered the room. Their normally drowsy eyes seemed to be somewhat alight for some reason.

Edeltraud walked over to the recumbent Rosemarie's side without needing the situation explained.

"In that case, Alto, call for Fritz."

Alto exited the bedroom per Claudio's order. He quickly fetched Fritz and brought him back, upon which Claudio furrowed his brow.

"You rotten rector, where have you been off drinking?"

"Oh, thass jus' cruel. I've been out, workin' my tail off to draw out

some information, and thass my thanks? Well, anyway, Her Royal Wifeness acting crazy what now?"

Claudio pushed the smiling, rosy-cheeked Fritz into the lounge. He glanced at Edel, who was checking on Rosemarie with a hand on her forehead; then at Heidi, who sat by her bed in concern. With an order to Alto to let him know if anything happened, he left the room.

Despite receiving no direction to sit down, Fritz sank down onto the couch carelessly. Claudio glanced at the priest, then took a rough seat on the small, single-person sofa. As he did, he threw a palm-sized leather sack down onto the table. Something hard behind the material hit the table with a *thud*.

"Is this the real thing?"

In her deranged state, the words "return what's important" left Rosemarie's mouth. The only thing in the room that might have required returning was the jewel, suspected of being the Sacred Relic.

How did Rosemarie end up like that? He could only imagine that this thing, which Edeltraud said was tinged in mana, was to blame.

Fritz took a nearby pitcher, poured some water for himself into a goblet, and took a drink from it. After which, he shut one eye and raised his hand.

"Yessiree, the real deal. We've hit the jackpot. *Boy*, this is kind of a mess, eh? I mean, the real Sacred Relic in our midst? *Yikes*." He seemed jovial on the surface, but there was no smile on his face. Claudio turned over the leather sack silently, as if annoyed, and let the contents drop onto the table. The jewel seemed almost luminescent, with its vibrant deep red hue and gold shavings.

"Even getting 'im drunk, I had a hard time gettin' 'im to spill it; I gotta work on my technique, y'know. ...So, anyway, as for that Sacred Relic we've got here..." Fritz combed back his hair, fixed his drunken tone, and gave Claudio a sharp, keen look.

"It was apparently stolen in the commotion of that rat carcass incident yesterday morning."

"Where is it normally enshrined?"

"Directly below the saint's chapel. You saw that Hippocampus statue there, right? It's enshrined underneath the pedestal, under lock and key. Incidentally, the only person with said key is His Eminence the Cardinal."

He recalled the Chapel of Saint Kamil. Just as Fritz said, there was a Hippocampus statue kneeling at the feet of the statue of the saint. As far as pedestals went, it was quite thick and heavy. It made him wonder how the bottom of something like that would even open.

"As for the key? Well, I was told it never went missing even once. Apparently, His Eminence the Cardinal is always carrying it on his person, and he has never lent it out to anyone."

“And in spite of all that, the Sacred Relic goes missing, eh? And it ends up here, for seemingly no reason.”

“It all sounds pretty funny, doesn’t it?”

Yes, it was pretty funny—and not in the laugh-out-loud way.

Claudio folded his arms and spun his gears in thought. Fritz clanked his goblet on the table after finishing his drink of water. Seeing that, something sprang to Claudio’s mind.

“Speaking of which, it seems that, earlier in the day, the chambermaid brought some water purified by the Sacred Relic called ‘lustral holy water’... But was that just normal water? The Sacred Relic was stolen yesterday, wasn’t it?”

“No, I think that’s holy water. They purify it every day, but they add it to water jugs so that it doesn’t run out. Actually... are you saying that the holy water is the cause behind Her Royal Wifeness’s strange behavior?”

“Perhaps. If there are traces of mana in the holy water, then there’s a chance of that holy water might’ve been altered... At the very least, I haven’t drunk it. Mostly because it was spilt when that squirrel ran amok. Although, I’m not sure about Rosemarie. She did say that she was going to wait for me to come back before she drank of it, but...” It would have been a hassle getting a second serving, nor did it seem to be essential, so he ended up not drinking a drop.

“There’s a chance she might’ve tasted it... is what you mean? Hmm, not too sure if there’s any correlation, though. After all, I never drank the holy water back when I was in the Holy Land.”

Those words caught Claudio’s ears, and he stopped his hand just as it was going to pick up the Sacred Relic from the table.

“You *didn’t* drink it?”

“Nope, not a drop. I just sprinkled it on the foreheads of the people who came for the Worship. Apparently, they only started letting you drink it in the past year.”

“The past year...? That makes me wonder what happened a year ago.” There must have been something that sparked the idea of drinking something they’d never drunk before. Claudio contemplated this for a bit, but the extreme lack of information made it hard to figure anything out.

“At any rate, it’s hard to say what is actually correlated. But, just to be sure, would you mind looking into what might’ve happened a year prior?”

“Yessir, yessir. Your wish is my command. So, what’s the plan for the Sacred Relic? Do you still plan on keeping it on your person, Your Highness? Or maybe you’re going to return it right away? Personally, I do think that, even if you can’t return it to its original spot, someone will find it if you just leave it somewhere around the altar when

nobody's looking." As Fritz circled his finger around the rim of the empty goblet, Claudio slowly picked up the Sacred Relic.

"I'll keep it on me. If Rosemarie has another fit and this proves to be essential, getting it back into our possession won't be an easy task." If he were to return it, it would undoubtedly be kept under strict security this time around. And if that happened, it would be an arduous process to take it back out.

"That leaves us with 'what' was calling Rosemarie and 'what' was telling her to return this. I wouldn't *like* to think that it's the statue of the saint, but..." He gripped the Sacred Relic and looked at the door to the bedroom. Unless they pinpointed the cause, the same situation was likely to happen again in the near future. They still had four days until the Sacred Relic Worship, and chances were that this might take a physical toll on Rosemarie.

"That would be Master Edel's area of expertise. The mystic arts seem to be heavily afoot here."

"Yes, quite right. I appreciate you getting all this information for me. I'm not what you'd call 'inconspicuous,' by any means. Puts a damper on any investigation I can do, too. As for you, go and get some rest. Get a fresh start for tomorrow."

"As you command. After all, as long as you come through when it really matters, it's fine. Well, then, since you insist, I'll be excusing myself. Poor Royal Wifeness. It's really tough being constantly mired by misfortune."

Fritz seemed jovial as he rose from his seat; but then he glanced at Rosemarie's bedroom, gave a melancholy sigh, and turned himself around.

Claudio then questioned him with his back turned. "Do you think the perpetrator who hid the Sacred Relic knew that this would happen?"

"Maybe. Though, I think the Sacred Relic being found in your room would be enough on its own to deal you a sufficient blow. If they were to have that much figured out, they might be holding a sizable grudge," Fritz said, shrugging his shoulders before making his exit. Claudio then went to open the bedroom door.

The sight of Rosemarie sleeping atop the bed as though dead, surrounded by Edeltraud and Heidi, made Claudio draw in his lips.

"A grudge, huh?" If that were indeed the case, who was it meant for?

Himself? The nation of Baltzar as a whole? Or, perhaps...

(I wouldn't *think* that someone would begrudge Rosemarie that much, but...) The Princess of Kavan whom he met in the dining hall? He knew that she was jealous of Rosemarie, but it seemed very unlikely that she would know that much and set something like this

up.

(Well, if she is the one behind this, she is not getting off lightly, that is for sure.)

Claudio stepped into the bedroom, realizing that the corner of his mouth had curled into a ferocious grin.

Whatever was rustling on her forehead tickled, causing Rosemarie to faintly open her eyes. Her surroundings were cast in a thin darkness.

The question of where she was came to mind, but she soon remembered that she was staying in the underground church in the Holy Land. Since there was little sunlight in the room, she couldn't tell if it was morning or night.

Her eyes wandered around listlessly until a palm-sized bundle of fur jumped into view.

"Momo...?"

Huddled up fast asleep next to Rosemarie's face, instead of in Heidi's care where she thought she'd left it, was the squirrel. What was it doing here?

"Awake?"

Claudio's voice sounded suddenly from behind her. Her shoulders jumped at the unexpected proximity of the voice. A moment later, she realized that Claudio had his arms wrapped around her from behind.

"...Erm, um, i-if you don't mind me asking, how did we end up like this? Oh, maybe I was half-asleep and danced around with my bucket—"

"If something that humorous had happened, I would be having a hearty chuckle over it, but... I assume you don't remember what happened yesterday?"

"Huh?" She gave a confused set of blinks as she tried thinking back on yesterday's events.

Yesterday, after arguing over sleeping in the same room with Claudio, they ended up sleeping next to one another. She was nervous, but she remembered that her overall fatigue assisted her in falling straight to sleep. Was there something else that happened aside from all that?

"You don't remember, do you? Well, what to do now..."

Not only was she bewildered by his hesitant tone, but she was also getting concerned that she might have accidentally done something at the same time.

"Um, could you possibly tell me what happened? I don't like being kept uninformed." Sure enough, she was afraid of having caused a critical error and being kept in the dark about it.

The arms wrapped around her stomach pulled her even closer, causing Rosemarie to tense up.

"It's not a pleasant tale." His tone was serious, with a hint of concern in the mix. On one hand, that pleased her; on the other, it made her afraid to listen.

"Yesterday, you started sleepwalking. What's worse, you were having a fit, saying that someone was calling."

A lump formed in her throat. She didn't have any recollection of that. Being told that she did something that she has no memory of physically doing made her go pale almost instantly.

"—I don't remember. I was in such a deep sleep I don't even recollect dreaming. I can't believe that I..."

She knew that Claudio wasn't lying to her, but it was hard to believe right away. She lowered her eyes contemplatively, as she suddenly noticed the several red marks lining Claudio's arms, wrapped around her waist.

"These are... scratch marks, aren't they? Did... I do this?" She ran trembling fingers over the scratches. When she did, Claudio clicked his tongue and grabbed her hand to stop her.

"They're not serious injuries. Don't worry; they'll heal in no time. Anyway, are you okay?"

A sense of guilt was crushing her heart. She really did have a deranged fit. That was why he was holding onto her: so she wouldn't lash out again.

The information suddenly thrust upon her—that she'd done something she had no memory of—summoned a sense of uneasiness that made her weak in the knees.

(I'm scared... but... Now isn't the time to be saying that I am. If we don't act wisely, Prince Claudio will be put in danger with me as the cause once again. I need to ask for details.)

Putting a lid on her desire to weep openly, she forced a smile and squeezed Claudio's hand in return.

"I'm fine! But... do you know what the cause of my episode was? You are so special to me that I do not wish to cause you any more injury, Prince Claudio." She desperately tried to keep her composure—making sure she wasn't choked by tears, making sure that she didn't tremble.

There was silence. Afterward, she felt a gentle warmth on the top of her head.

Rosemarie looked up, clueless as to what Claudio was doing, to find her vision buried in a field of silvery-white. Her eyes widened.

Those soft beastlike hairs touched her lips.



Once she realized that Claudio had leaned over from behind and was covering her lips with his, Rosemarie found herself pushing Claudio's chin away with both hands.

"Wait a... h-hold on just a minute...!" Her face was immediately flushed, her fear from before suddenly gone by the wayside. A kiss out of nowhere was bad for her heart—extremely bad—and she wished he had given her a little bit more time to mentally prepare herself.

(He never goes for a sudden approach normally. Did I say something that touched a nerve? Oh, maybe this is payback for causing him harm?)

Her agonizingly bashful thoughts led her to that conclusion, and she tried hard to convince herself that that was the case. But once she did, she noticed Claudio's chin had become unexpectedly smooth in her hands.

Suspicious, Rosemarie looked at him. Her mouth went agape.

"Rosemarie... let me go," Claudio said in a struggling voice, snapping the girl back to her senses. Rosemarie let go of his chin, got up, and took a look at Claudio from the front for confirmation—what she saw shocked her.

"...Your face looks human," she murmured under her breath, unable to process what was going on. Claudio's eyes widened in response.

"Are you certain? Don't tell me... that last kiss helped revert it...?" Claudio rose and tried to reach out for her, but Rosemarie bent backward to dodge his hand out of reflex. Much to her dismay, however, she bent back too far, causing her arms on the bed to slip from under her.

"—Ah!"

"Watch out!" Claudio yanked her arm and pulled her to him. She avoided falling to the cold floor below, but—almost as a trade-off—her pulse went wild.

"For God's sake, what are you doing?" Claudio's relieved voice rang in her ears. She knew that this giddiness she felt was causing her head to spin.

"...Please, let me go." Her voice was so unexpectedly feeble that even she thought it was pathetic. Claudio slowly backed himself away from her, but he kept ahold of her arms.

"Why are you trying to avoid me? Did you hate kissing just now? I'm sorry for being so abrupt with it. I apologize, so please improve your mood."

"No, that isn't it. It wasn't that I hated it... In any case, please, just give me a little space to myself."

Rosemarie found herself unable to look at Claudio's face more so

than usual. Before she realized her romantic feelings for him, this bashfulness wouldn't drag out for so long, either. And now that his face was back to human form and his expressions were easier to comprehend, it made it even worse.

He squeezed her arm for a second, but silently released it before long.

"—Okay." As soon as Claudio said that, she could feel him getting out of the bed.

"I still haven't finished talking about what happened yesterday. Once you get yourself dressed, come to the lounge," Claudio informed her indifferently and exited the bedroom.

As soon as he was gone, Rosemarie buried her face in her pillow. Perhaps the squirrel curled up right next to her finally woke up from the impact, but it snuggled itself up against her head. She didn't know when she had it returned to her, but the Kaola pendant was around her neck and its sweet aroma wafted through the air, bringing her to the brink of tears.

"...I've upset him."

Although she couldn't help but feel embarrassed, she probably could have been a little bit more couth with her phrasing. She wouldn't be surprised if Claudio was fed up with her because of what just happened.

Finding herself in a self-deprecating rut, she got up to search for her bucket to stabilize her mood. Just as she did, the door opened.

"Good morning, princess! How are we feeling?" Heidi entered the room with a chipper greeting, but as Rosemarie looked at her, her lips trembled.

"...I feel like I want to wear my bucket."

"Very well, milady. I'm just going to go wring Prince Claudio's neck; be back in a jiffy!" Heidi said, her head suddenly changing into that of a black cat along with her dreadful threat. The maid turned on her heel toward the exit, but Rosemarie scrambled to cling to her arm before she could go.

The girl's crimson lips flapped like the wings of a butterfly.

"Oh my, is that so? So, what happened then? Tee hee hee, surely you jest, good sir. Oh, that reminds me, Prince Claudio—"

Sitting next to Claudio and chatting while exchanging casual laughs was the Princess of Kavan, Suzette.

(She sure can work a conversation... How can she manage speaking like that?)

Rosemarie thought, putting aside her jealousy to be impressed as she sat in the seat across from Claudio. She wasn't able to get a word

in edgewise.

And she couldn't turn around as she felt the anger brimming from Heidi behind her.

Perhaps as a result of people oversleeping, the dining hall that morning was less populated than it was during last night's dinner. Nevertheless, it was still quite boisterous.

Suzette came along later than Claudio's party. Upon seeing that Rosemarie wasn't sitting next to Claudio, she took a spot next to him and started gleefully chatting away with him.

She had since regained her composure and heard the story from the obviously displeased Claudio and Edeltraud. As he had warned her beforehand, the details were not pleasant, indeed.

The jewel hidden inside the chest of drawers was the Sacred Relic, the practice of drinking holy water had only begun within the last year, and she had tried to go somewhere while sleepwalking. All the while having a fit about someone calling for her, to boot.

(Though, Master Edel said that I wasn't under any kind of spell... And I didn't even drink any of the holy water, either.)

Rosemarie looked at Edeltraud, who stood behind Claudio wearing their usual sleepy countenance, and let out a small sigh.

From the time Adelina the chambermaid brought the pitcher to the time the squirrel flipped it over, she hadn't had a single drop. She was told that it might very well be the root cause of the issue, so if it wasn't, what was actually the cause of this, as Heidi put it, "horror novel"-esque situation she found herself in?

Rosemarie pictured herself in a deranged fit and shuddered.

"Are you cold?" Claudio suddenly asked in the midst of his happy little conversation with Suzette.

"Huh?" Rosemarie blinked, dumbfounded.

"I'm asking if you're cold because you appeared to be shivering." Claudio was probably displeased that she answered his question with a question. She looked at his pensive face, then shook her head by way of a proper reply. Now that she no longer saw his Silver Lion head and could make out his expression clearly, she was at a loss as to whether she preferred being able to read his mood.

"No, um..."

"If you're cold, you should head back."

She had already finished eating her breakfast—a stewed riced porridge made with goat's milk. Dinner was in a similar vein: the meals here were simple and fairly plain, almost like something common people would eat. This was probably a part of their rhetoric of equality and lack of a hierarchy. Just like yesterday's rabbit soup, the porridge had a gentle and inviting taste which she was fond of.

Rosemarie, having basically been told to go away, kept herself

from feeling down long enough to stand up from her seat.

“—Right, if you’ll excuse me, then.”

“Yes, be careful on the way back. Take Alto along with you.” In a display unlike last night, Claudio didn’t stand up along with Rosemarie and continued his conversation with Suzette. Edeltraud squinted a bit and nodded slightly.

She could see Suzette throwing a glance her way, her eyes narrowed ever so slightly by her triumphant smile. Suzette’s head morphed into that of a dirty blonde dog, a sight which made Rosemarie briskly leave the dining hall—less out of fear and more from just being overwhelmed.

“—Princess, are you *positive* you don’t want me to wring Prince Claudio’s neck?” Heidi asked once they had exited the dining hall, her voice trembling with rage as her anger turned her head into that of a black cat.

“Good maid, please. Calm yourself. While I don’t blame you for being upset over what His Highness has done... This must be some part of a deeper plan.” Alto, probably discerning Claudio’s motives based on the scene in the room, had convened with the pair at the entryway, trying—albeit awkwardly—to defuse the situation.

Nonetheless, Heidi laid the heat on Alto. “Oh, then, would you mind explaining what deep plan involves sending away the princess, *his wife*, because she’s interrupting his chat with the princess of another nation?”

“Uh, well, I can’t quite say that myself...” Alto stammered back, befuddled.

Heidi was brimming with anger, so Rosemarie tried to quell her rage the best she could. “Heidi, I really don’t mind, so let us return.” While thankful for Heidi being angry on her behalf, Rosemarie urged her trusted maid to come along. Reluctantly, Heidi started walking.

Just then the caretaker, Ilse, came up to them. Today, his head was that of a gray bird, a sight that made her flinch a bit. “Are you returning to your room? Will you be all right navigating your way there?”

Rosemarie turned to Heidi and Alto, who both nodded in response.

“—Yes. Yes, I will. I think we will be able to manage.” Once she had conveyed that to Ilse, the bishop gave a short bow and prepared to walk away. That was, however, until a thought sprung to mind and she called out to the back of his head.

“—Um, pardon, Bishop Lancel? Are you busy at the moment?”

“No, taking care of my guests takes priority over my daily duties. How can I be of service?” His bird eyes were darting around in his head. Although she was secretly freaked out by that, Rosemarie

opened her mouth.

“I was hoping that you’d escort me to the saint’s chapel. I’d like to say a prayer, you see...” She wanted to clear her mind and get herself out of this slump. Even if Claudio did hate her, at worst he’d just go back to being crabby like he was when they first got to know each other. It wouldn’t end up hurting her. That was what she wanted to tell herself.

“Very well, then. Allow me to show you the way.” His tone was cool and indifferent, but Ilse acquiesced to her request. She then followed him to the chapel.

Another day of the chapel being positively barren. According to Ilse, once the morning worship concluded, everyone was usually too preoccupied with preparing breakfast and other such random matters, so almost no one ever came around this time. Also, apparently, the chapel was open for the public at noon.

In similar fashion to yesterday, she proceeded to the altar with Heidi, clasped her hands, and offered a prayer. As she did, the aroma of Kaola wafted through the air. Her chest tightened.

(This is no time to be depressed. If he hates me, I can return to Volland after returning his mana. I should be happy.)

That seemed extremely idealistic. Claudio would probably have no qualms about letting her go back to Volland.

Feeling a tiny bit better, she slowly rose to her feet.

Rosemarie looked up at the altar once more and admired the brilliant sculptures—that was when it happened.

It was the statue of the Hippocampus kneeling below the statue of the saint. Between the crack of the folded limbs and the pedestal, she could see what appeared to be brown animal hair. Had that been there yesterday?

“Um, Bishop Lancel?” Rosemarie turned to Ilse. “Is there supposed to be a rug of animal fur spread below the Hippocampus?”

“Animal fur? No, there shouldn’t be,” the bishop replied, his tone unusually perplexed. Ilse approached it, cocking his avian head.

“Who would shove this into here...?” Ilse said, but cut himself off as he went around the altar and pulled out the fur.

“Is something the matte—”

“Don’t look!”

Rosemarie curiously tried peeking at what Ilse was holding, but he pushed her shoulders away with a sharp command.

“Princess!” Her body staggered in surprise, but Heidi, standing behind her, hurried to catch her. Alto, who was standing at the entry as on the first day, quickly rushed over.

“Bishop Lancel! What in blazes are you... grk?!” Alto questioned, standing as if to shield Rosemarie, but it wasn’t long before she saw

his back trembling. That same back blocked her view of whatever was in Ilse's hands.

"Squire, return Princess Rosemarie to her room. I shall inform Prince Claudio about this matter."

"Yes, of course. Your Highness, let us go."

It must have been something they didn't want to show her. Alto utilized his height to keep Ilse, still behind them, from view. It was only serving to contribute to her fear. Rosemarie went to hold Heidi's hand after the maid helped her regain her balance. This all gave off an odious vibe.

If memory served, this was the same chapel where that rat had been left—the one killed in that horribly sadistic manner.

"Um, Squire Clausen, what was..." Rosemarie started to timidly ask, squeezing her clammy hands. Alto, who had urged them to walk along, hesitantly looked behind him before facing them.

"—A rabbit. The same as that rat." His phrasing was vague but had enough information to infer from.

"P-Princess..." Heidi was taken aback, and Rosemarie was also at a loss for words.

The same as the rat. Did that mean that rabbit was missing both its eyes as well?

She felt herself shivering from her very core. It was no wonder why Ilse hurried to push her out of the way.

"Staying here might be dangerous. Let us return to the room." Alto pressed the possibility of someone planning an ambush, and Rosemarie complied. She started to move her legs, but turned around.

"Um, the rabbit will need to be buried..."

"We shall give it a proper burial. Put your mind at ease, Princess Rosemarie." Ilse reassured her. His head had returned to human form, his expression still the picture of tranquility as he held the thing bundled in his shawl. Knowing he would give it a proper burial filled her with a sense of relief.

Nodding in reply, Rosemarie started walking with Heidi leading her by the hand.

Once they made the hurried trek back to the room they were staying in, Alto tried opening the door, but suddenly stopped moving with a grim face.

"Squire Clausen? Is there something the—" Rosemarie questioned, but Alto put his index finger in front of his lips to silence her.

Just as she pursed her lips and swallowed her words, the sound of something knocking echoed from inside the room.

(Is someone inside?)

There was no possible way that Claudio could have returned faster than they did. She hadn't spotted Fritz since morning, but he was on

assignment from Claudio to do some investigation, so he wouldn't be back so soon.

Alto signaled for them to fall back. She and Heidi slowly moved themselves away from the door.

One he saw that they were clear, Alto carefully opened the door a crack and—

“Eeeeeek!!” A female shriek rang out from inside.

Alto swung the door open. —Then, after a pause, a massive amount of white furballs came spilling out from inside like an avalanche. Alto's legs were caught up in it, and he was swallowed up in the blink of an eye.

“Squire Clausen!”

Upon closer inspection, the furballs had round eyes, soft fur lining their backs, and a membrane stretching from their front paws to their back—all of which was indicative of flying squirrels.

“—! Is this Mage Edeltraud's idea of a joke?!” Alto's head turned into that of a deer in a rare display of anger as he waded his way out of the sea of flying squirrels.

“Um, well, it's a consideration so that no one gets hurt... I believe.”

“But don't you think this is *too many* squirrels, Princess? An *unsettling* number of squirrels?” Rosemarie's face tensed up along with Heidi's as she suddenly caught sight of a young girl within the room entangled by dozens of flying squirrels. She stared, bewildered, finding it hard to believe.

“Why, you! What is going on?! Don't climb up me! Stay away from me!”

“Adelina...!”

The young chambermaid was brushing off the squirrels that were scurrying up her like mad. Her shoulders jumped at Rosemarie's call and she looked her way. Her head was that of a short-haired weasel.

“Oh, milady! I apologize! I came in to clean and this happened...” Adelina had mentioned coming in to clean when they first met, so her presence was unsurprising. In fact, she was probably trying to finish things up while Rosemarie and her party weren't around.

However...

Once Rosemarie stepped foot inside the room, the massive wave of squirrels instantly diminished until only one remained. The flying squirrel with the flower emblem darted across the floor, ran up Rosemarie's body, and perched on her shoulder.

“I appreciate you saving me, milady.” Probably out of relief, Adelina's head reverted to human form. Rosemarie approached her, noticing that the elegant chest of drawers was slightly damaged.

“Adelina.”

“Yes, what is it?” The young chambermaid replied promptly, almost as soon as she was addressed. She was holding a cleaning bucket, its bottom slightly dented, in one hand.

“We have something very important in the chest of drawers, so Prince Claudio cast a spell on it so that it won’t open. Also, if you try to force it open, it will make it so that the traces are evident.”

Accurately speaking, Edeltraud was the one who cast the spell, but that wasn’t pertinent. She didn’t know in what manner it would manifest, but she’d never have guessed it would be an illusory flood of flying squirrels. It was hard to tell what the intention was behind it—were they meant to attack the interloper, or melt their heart?

The drawer didn’t have a lock, so anyone could open it if they tried. But since it was set up to keep it from opening, the greater the value of the item within, the more desperate the person trying to open the drawer would become. However, the drawer was empty because the Sacred Relic was on Claudio’s person.

Alto caught on to the situation, quickly shutting the door and standing guard in front of it.

“—Why did you try to open it?”

“I did not try to open it. I was cleaning and knocked the chest over, and I worried that the drawer might be broken, so I panicked... I am very sorry for the misunderstanding!” Adelina said with a wry smile, her head morphing back into the weasel head with the short orange fur.

(She’s... lying.)

The fact that Rosemarie saw similarities between her own younger sister and the maid made the sight of the animal head all the more disappointing. Rosemarie approached her, still disappointed, and took the cleaning bucket from her hand.

“Milady! What are you doing...?”

“The scratches on the chest of drawers and the dents on the bottom of this bucket line up. Were you whacking at it, by any chance? Why would you do that?”

They had heard the sound of something getting hit before they entered the room. This might have been the source of that.

Adelina stepped back in fear.

“You tried to open it, didn’t you? You *knew* what was inside of it.”

“I just... I wouldn’t... No, that isn’t what I...”

“Adelina, I’m asking you nicely, so answer me. Why did you hide the Sacred Relic in this chest of drawers...?” Rosemarie practically pleaded with her for an answer, prompting the girl to tremble all over.

The chambermaid dropped limply to her knees and hung her head. Her tiny back was trembling in minute waves. Worried that she had pushed her too far, Rosemarie placed her hand on it.

“Adelina, let me...”

Her shoulders went from slight shivering to huge shakes. Her weasel head snapped up, facing the ceiling.

“Ahahaha! This is *all* that deformed prince’s fault. He *stole* our home away from us!” Adelina shouted with a deranged laugh. The sight made Rosemarie pull her hand back and look on in shock.

“Prince Claudio... stole your home...?”

“That’s right. If that deformed prince hadn’t arrested the Archbishop, our orphanage wouldn’t have been shut down. None of us would have gone missing, either. All of this, absolutely all of this, is that beast’s fault...!” She looked at Rosemarie with her bloodshot and dilated eyes, making the princess take a step back. The squirrel upon her shoulder gave off a protective growl.

“I hope he gets executed for stealing the Sacred Relic. Yes, I hope the cretin dies. Die and repent, die, die, die—” Clearly having lost her sanity, she mumbled a string of resentful words from her weasel mouth as she rocked her head back and forth. Even so, despite that, there was a sense of bitter pathos from her voice that broke Rosemarie’s heart.

“Princess!”

“Your Highness!”

“Rosemarie!”

She heard both Heidi and Alto cry out in panic. And she wasn’t sure if she was hearing things, but she felt like she heard Claudio’s voice in the mix as well. Before she realized, she had Adelina’s slender body in a full-bodied embrace.

Adelina’s body was shaking tremendously. She twisted her body as if writhing in pain.

“Let me go, let me go, let me gooo!!” She kept her desperate embrace tight despite the girl’s crazed fit and was met with a mysterious sensation—it was like something had dropped off the young girl’s body.

No sooner had her suspicions been raised than Adelina’s neck arched backward. Then, the chambermaid crumpled limply onto Rosemarie.

“...Adelina?” For a brief, terrifying moment, Rosemarie wondered if she had accidentally strangled the girl. The thought sent shivers down her spine. She rubbed the back of the now-human-headed Adelina, who regained consciousness in the bat of an eyelid.

“—Milady? What am I...” Adelina blinked, as if a dark spirit had left her body, and quickly separated herself from Rosemarie. Her face took weasel form again, and she looked behind Rosemarie fearfully.

“Asking what you’ve done is *quite* the question, all things considered. How much of this was of your own accord,

chambermaid?” Claudio’s voice, resonating with a silent anger, made Rosemarie suddenly turn around. She didn’t know when he got back, but Claudio was there near the door, scowling and glaring at Adelina.

“You mentioned the Archbishop, no? If you mean the same Archbishop I had arrested, then you must mean the same helpless *scumbag* with an endless list of crimes to his name. I don’t know what misguided concept fuels your grudge, but end it *now*.”

“...My grudge is not misguided. You closed down the orphanage, and now all the orphans are missing. Who knows what’s happening to them now...”

In spite of the girl’s stare of contempt, Claudio returned her stare, nonchalantly and with arms folded. “By ‘closed-down orphanage,’ I assume you mean that place, the one I had investigated... If memory serves, the director of that orphanage had been funneling the state-funded operating budget and aristocratic donations to Archbishop Kastner.”

The weasel-headed Adelina stared at him, eyes widened. Her trembling hand balled itself into a fist.

“No, that can’t be. I mean, the director was a kind soul. He was always apologizing to us and blaming himself for not being able to provide us with a better life... Which is why, ever since I came to work in the Holy Land with help from the Archbishop, I had been taking my wages from serving here and...”

“And sending them back to him? I don’t know whether or not those funds made it back to the orphans. What I do know is that, according to the reports I received upon our securing the facility, all the children there were malnourished and emaciated.”

Adelina dropped to the floor, covering her mouth. Tears streamed from her brown eyes as her head remained in weasel form.

“The children of the orphanage were indeed split up, but they were placed in several orphanages run by the state or trustworthy people. That was the best I was able to do.”

“...You’re lying. That can’t be true. You’re trying to deceive me into believing you.”

“If you wish to think that, feel free to do so. However, facts are facts.” Claudio spoke his truth in an indifferent, almost cold and uncaring tone, causing even more tears to run from Adelina’s eyes.

“Adelina, if you find it hard to believe, then why don’t you try sending a letter to the new orphanages?” Rosemarie got to her knees and went to touch Adelina’s shoulder, but she shook it off.

“Don’t touch me! I can’t stand princesses like you, drunk off being ‘kind and compassionate.’ You don’t know the first thing about hardships, so keep your self-serving tripe to yourself!” Adelina suddenly stood up and tried to make a break for the door, but Claudio

intercepted her.

“Let me go, you filthy beast!”

“Okay, you. How did you steal the Sacred Relic?” Claudio pressed her in a low tone. Adelina turned her cheek and committed to silence.

“Not planning on answering, huh? In that case, did you hide it knowing that it would have effects on the human body?”

“Effects on the human body...?” Adelina repeated, dubious. Figuring that she had no idea what he meant, Claudio let go of her hand. Backing up little by little, Adelina turned on her heels and started to run away.

“Don’t chase her, Alto. She isn’t going to be causing us any more problems—unless she’s foolish enough to dare.” After halting his aide from taking chase, Claudio sighed with his gaze falling upon Rosemarie.

“You’re not hurt, I take it?” he asked Rosemarie, who awkwardly nodded in reply. She then chuckled feebly.

“She... ended up hating me.”

“Don’t worry about it. She told *me* to die.”

She frowned at the unamusing joke, making Claudio retract his smile.

“I swear, I never would have guessed that the Archbishop’s evil influence had spread all the way out here. Just how far do the roots even go?” Claudio tensed his brow, vexed, and gestured for Rosemarie to sit down.

She parked herself on the couch. Perhaps she was more nervous than she’d thought, because she suddenly found herself hit with a dizzy spell so bad, she had to quickly put one hand on the seat to stay upright. The squirrel riding on her shoulder slid near her cheek as a result.

Heidi said that she would bring her some water and scrambled to the corner of the room.

“If you are not feeling well, then lie down. Master Edel, have a look at her, if you would.” Claudio, sitting on the single-seat sofa, turned his attention behind him. They must have come back with Claudio.

After poking their head out from the entrance, Edeltraud practically slid over to her and touched her forehead with their gloved hand. They cocked their head, bewildered, yet still expressionless.

“Very small amount, but you have traces of another mana, not Claudio’s, on you. Where did you absorb it?”

The unexpected question caught Rosemarie off guard. She stared, eyes wide. “Where...? Huh? I have no clue. I haven’t run into any sorcerers...”

“There are people with mana who aren’t sorcerers. Weren’t like

this earlier this morning. Touch anyone after breakfast?”

Rosemarie, starting to feel like she was being interrogated, tried her very best to recall. It didn't help matters that she had Claudio's silent and painful stare on her the whole time.

(After breakfast, I ran into Bishop Lancel, but I didn't touch him... It can't be Heidi, nor Squire Clausen... Oh.)

There was someone. The only other person it could have been. “Adelina...”

“Adelina? The chambermaid a second ago?” Edeltraud asked, perplexed. Rosemarie awkwardly obliged with a nod.

“Yes. When I held her in the midst of her fit, I felt something strange... It was like, I'm not entirely sure how to explain it, but it felt like her outer layer was peeling—like something covering her had come off.” Coincidentally enough, after she felt that, Adelina suddenly regained a grip on herself. She was still angry, but she, at least, wasn't out of her senses.

“That's the sign a spell was broken. I see now. That's what happened.”

She timidly looked up at Edeltraud, who seemed to have already made sense of the situation... The Archmagus removed their hand from Rosemarie's forehead and turned to face Claudio.

“Chambermaid was under a spell. Probably what made her steal Sacred Relic. Under spell that amplified grudge in her.”

“—I figured as much.” Claudio, his face sullen, put his hand to his chin contemplatively. His face looked grim; he didn't even look Rosemarie's way.

“Amplified her grudge...” She most likely perpetrated something so outrageous because she was under the influence of a spell. Which meant...

“So, there is a person who cast a spell on Adelina?”

“Correct. Here, in the underground cathedral where sorcerers are banned,” Claudio affirmed in a rigid tone, bringing his hands together atop his folded legs.

“Bishop Lancel informed me that they found a rabbit carcass in the saint's chapel this time. This series of incidents might also be correlated in some way.” There was an unknown sorcerer in their midst, and the fact that they didn't know what their agenda was in doing all of this made Rosemarie that much more unsettled by it.

“Master Edel, I'd like to ask you something...” Claudio started, unusually hesitant, after sitting in deep thought about something. “Do you think that there's any possibility that Mage Lene, the former guard of the Forbidden Forest, has a hand in this situation?”

Rosemarie raised her head with a gasp. It was true that the only other sorcerer that came to mind other than Edeltraud was the person

said to show up at the Sacred Relic Worship ceremony and the former guard of the Forbidden Forest—the sorcerer, Lene.

“I don’t know how Mage Lene is as a person. Are they the type of dangerous individual that would play with the lives of others if given a reason?” Claudio questioned Edeltraud, who blinked once, squinted their eyes, and took a sullen expression. For someone like Edeltraud, who didn’t emote, it was quite odd.

“When Master Lene passed on position of guard to me, they said, ‘Woo-hoo, baby! Out of the joint after decades! Aah, the air is sweet! The water’s even sweeter! And treasure’s out there callin’ my name!’ ...doing little jig as they exited.” Heidi, who had just brought the water, started laughing, almost unexpectedly. In front of the door, Alto cleared his throat as if to cover up a laugh.

“The joint?” Rosemarie looked confused upon hearing the unfamiliar word. Heidi stepped in and explained it to her.

“The ‘joint’ is common vernacular, among those who frequent them, for a ‘prison.’” Given that definition, Lene must have felt as though they were being freed from prison when they said that.

Not sure how she should discern that, she slowly looked over at Claudio, who had a rather complicated expression on his face.

“—Mage Lene was fond of treasure?” After all that pondering, it was almost like he had ignored hearing the previous part of Edeltraud’s statement. That made sense, though. He didn’t want to believe that a person who had held one of the most important jobs in his country had such a lackluster personality.

“Yes. Treasure was his ruling passion. As well as things with checkered pasts regarding mystic arts.” Edeltraud uttered invaluable information, once again without an expression gracing their face.

“And we so happen to have ‘something with a checkered past regarding mystic arts’ right here, right now,” said Claudio with a dauntless smile, touching the breast pocket that most likely held the Sacred Relic.

“Now it’s all clear. Their reason for showing up at the Sacred Relic Worship ceremony every time was to plot a way to steal it...”

“Don’t think so. Never did it to collect. Master Lene liked decrypting mysteries behind items with checkered pasts. Hated being put in control of them. ‘A treasure’s worth is right where it is;’ ‘Breaking spells without discretion is bound for trouble;’ ‘Magic is to be used rationally’—all pet theories of Lene’s. That’s why never stays in one place.”

Upon hearing that the former guard had thoroughly betrayed his expectations, Claudio glared through half-lidded eyes. “Okay, *fine*. I get it. I get that Mage Lene isn’t the type to do something like this.” It was indeed established that Lene wasn’t the type to do that, but it

raised doubts of whether they'd be fine seeing the Kaola and their situation. However, Rosemarie kept her mouth shut.

"If Mage Lene isn't who we're looking for, then we should consider there being another sorcerer here..."

"Um, could there possibly be other people under a spell like Adelina was?" If there were, there was a possibility of those people taking drastic actions that they normally wouldn't, just like with Adelina.

"—Well, yes. There could be." Claudio glanced at Edeltraud and nodded slightly.

"In any case, it's safe to assume that we have an unidentified sorcerer hiding among the crowd. As I mentioned earlier, if we assume that the animal carcass matter is correlated, then I can only imagine that sorcerer wants to stop the Sacred Relic Worship from happening. Hypothetically speaking, of course."

Rosemarie squeezed her hands as they sat on her lap. "Will there still be incidents leading up to the day of the Sacred Relic Worship?"

"All I can say is that I wouldn't be surprised if there were... Then again, I have no intention of delving into this to crack a mystery."

Rosemarie looked at Claudio sigh in annoyance, blinking at those unexpected words. "You've been analyzing so many facets of this, I just assumed you were trying to get to the bottom of this..."

"One can't cope with a situation once it occurs without a little forethought. If it means causing me any harm, I don't plan on doing anything unnecessary. Our agenda is to meet and ask questions of the former guard of the Forbidden Forest. Worst case scenario, we settle for meeting Mage Lene without there being a Sacred Relic Worship."

That was a sound argument. He was right; it wasn't their place to intrude into affairs. This was for the people of the Holy Land to resolve. After all, they were nothing more than visitors here. Regardless, she still pondered whether that sat all right with her.

"Um, does this mean that you won't be reporting Adelina to the Cardinal and the others?"

"No, I'll be making a report, all right. I can't just overlook what she has done."

"...Yes, you're right."

"What? You look dissatisfied," Claudio questioned, sounding dubious. Rosemarie hesitated for a second before opening her mouth to speak.

"Considering that she did that because she was being controlled by magic, I just thought, well..."

"That I'd have mercy? Well, also consider that she would have never ended up like that if she didn't have an iota of desire to bring me down in the first place."

“Yes, I am aware of that. As I am also aware that it’s not a matter that can be casually brushed aside. However, it would bug me to let her go on with the misconception that you are to blame, Prince Claudio.”

At this rate, she would probably resent Claudio, thinking it was his fault that she was charged for her crimes. That was why Rosemarie wanted to, at least, clear this misconception up.

Claudio’s serious-looking stare was making Rosemarie uneasy; she dropped her gaze.

—“You needn’t worry about that. Also, I’m not going to report her right away. If I did, I would be forced to return the Sacred Relic.”

“Returning it would be a... *bad* thing?” If he didn’t want to get involved, then he would probably return it right away—that was her thought process.

However, in response to Rosemarie’s question, Claudio squinted.

“We just might need it if you have another sleepwalking episode tonight. I plan on keeping it until the day of the Sacred Relic Worship ceremony.”

Rosemarie’s shoulders jumped. She had almost forgotten. That was still an issue yet to be resolved. The memory of that was making her a little afraid to go to sleep.

“Well, maybe I should just stay awake all night long, then.” She tried making a humorous little quip to shake off her sense of fear, but Claudio grimaced in response. He then stood up without giving the comment a reply.

“You have no plans for today, right? Spend the day however it is you like.”

“Prince Claudio, where are you going, if you don’t mind me asking?” Rosemarie haphazardly inquired, feeling that he was about to go somewhere. Claudio glanced at her and quickly turned his eyes away.

“Princess Suzette is having a few of the guests over for a tea party and invited me.”

“Huh...?”

“Not diplomatic by any means, but it will be a good chance to hear about the climates of other nations firsthand. I’m planning on attending. You don’t need to come.”

She felt a little ache in her heart, as it seemed he was basically telling her to stay away. But Claudio had had consideration in the past for her—knowing that she was afraid of seeing people’s animosity as beast heads and setting it up so that she didn’t need to attend banquets or parties. Remembering that, she raised her head. There would be many a husband and wife attending an event like that together.

“Um, I will be just fine. An event like that should—”

“Did you not hear me when I said ‘You don’t need to come?’ The only one invited here was me.” Claudio sighed in a slightly irritated manner. Rosemarie hushed up, unable to push the matter any further.

“—Yes... I understand. Take care. I will be here when you return.”

“Yes, I’ll be back.” Claudio turned around to exit the room without so much as a smile, but Rosemarie called out to stop him.

“Prince Claudio, will you be okay without your morning resupply?” She still hadn’t gone through her daily routine of holding his hand to maintain his health. If he didn’t make sure to do this, then it might have repercussions on Claudio’s well-being. Even if she’d fallen into disfavor with him, that was the one thing she had to do.

“I’ll pass for today.”

Rosemarie had stood up with her hand extended, but Claudio only gave it a passing glance before opening the door. He then exited the room without turning back around for a second.

Rosemarie stood there, dumbfounded, as Edeltraud came up to her vacant hand, held it tight, and shook it up and down.

“Ass needs kicking. Gonna do that.” A slight grin formed on Edeltraud’s usually unsmiling lips as they left the room, chasing down Claudio.

The door had completely shut, but Rosemarie still stood in the exact place she had been, unmoving. Heidi then called out to her in a concerned tone.

“Princess?”

“—Heidi, may I ask you for a hammer?”

“Huh?” Heidi’s face froze in shock.

“Your Highness, no matter how cruel His Highness may be, you mustn’t resort to that!” Alto, standing at the entry, rebuked while turning pale in the face.

“He’s right, princess. You mustn’t stoop to being a criminal because of a deplorable man that’s smitten with a woman other than his own wife. It’s downright—”

“Calm down, Heidi. I’m not going to hit Claudio with it. I was thinking of busting up my bucket...”

“You, princess? Busting up the bucket you call an extension of yourself? Are you all right? Please, come back to your senses!”

Her attempts to settle her nerves had ended up racking them instead. Rosemarie held Heidi’s hand, as her shoulders shook, and smiled.

“As long as the bucket is around, I’ll want to run to it, so I was just thinking of busting it up. After all, if I just put it in the storage trunk, then I’ll end up pulling it out right away.” She was going to quit putting on the bucket when a problem arose. After all the times

that Claudio told her not to wear it, she never thought that it would be *after* she fell out of favor with him that she would finally see it through.

“Though, it may have been a little too late...”

“No, you’re perfectly fine just the way you are; don’t you worry about it!” Heidi exclaimed with tears in her eyes, so Rosemarie gave the bucket over to her, which managed to put her own mind at ease for the time being.

Thwack! went the sound of a foot suddenly kicking Claudio in his derriere from behind. After a slight stagger, he angrily turned around to face who it was.

“Master Edel, what do you think you’re doing?!”

“Even if don’t want Volland Princess to follow you, went too far.” It wasn’t showing on their face, but Edeltraud’s critical eyes were focused squarely on Claudio, which made him turn his head.

“I couldn’t bring her with me. Not in front of that princess glaring at Rosemarie like she practically killed her parents. She wouldn’t have understood unless I gave that spiel.”

“Even if it hurts her?”

Claudio momentarily bit down on his lip as Edeltraud made an all-too accurate point.

“Sacrifices have to be made. There is a possibility that the Princess of Kavan is under a spell as well. She has been breathing down my neck an awful lot, after all. If I were in front of her with Rosemarie with me, she might amplify her animosity and do something unwarranted.” Regardless of the merit of his actions, in the end, there was a precedent for them—especially considering what had happened with Adelina.

“If she’s by my side, her grudge toward me will also be directed toward Rosemarie. It’s for the best that I keep her at a distance.” Even so, that didn’t stop him from regretting taking his comments too far, just as Edeltraud had pointed out.

“And truthfully speaking?”

“I can’t stand not having Rosemarie.” Not even half a day had passed since she refused his kiss this morning, yet he wanted to touch her so badly that he couldn’t contain it. Getting turned down by her had sent his thoughts that way to an unnecessary degree.

“She was the one who said that she didn’t want me coming near her, yet she tells me she wants to go through our morning resupply. What is she trying to pull? Is she toying with me?” Perhaps it was because she considered it part of her job, but it still stung a little.

With a deep sigh, he put his hand on his forehead.

“Volland Princess not capable of such sophisticated act. Both of you should talk little more. I can set up another illusion, if you want.” There was a hint of amusement in Edeltraud’s otherwise indifferent tone, which made Claudio furrow his brow.

Back when things were still rough around the edges, Edeltraud took Rosemarie into town and set up an illusion of bandits robbing them, hiding the carriage temporarily. He remembered the whole thing well. Upon hearing that Rosemarie hadn’t returned to the castle, he deeply regretted not apologizing to her and leaving her feelings hurt.

“Oh, here are my hands. They shook Volland Princess’s hand.” Edeltraud showed both of his hands to Claudio. He was about to take one without even thinking, but he snapped to his senses. Edeltraud chuckled.

“Must be terminal.”

“You shut up. Just leave me alone.” His face turned red from the mage’s teasing as he proceeded to stomp his way down the passageway.

Chapter 4: That Which Goes Seen and Unseen

“All right, I will be waiting on hand in the lounge. If anything happens, please just call for me. Momo, keep guard over the princess, too, okay?”

The flying squirrel on Rosemarie’s shoulder stood up emphatically in response.

Rosemarie nodded with a wry smile to Heidi after her repeated instructions, and the maid exited the bedroom, eyebrows slanted in worry. Then, as though switching places with her, Claudio entered. Despite being about to go to sleep, he wasn’t dressed for bed; rather, he was still in the same outfit he’d worn earlier in the day. The same went for Rosemarie. Since there was a chance something might happen tonight, she figured it best not to change into her nightgown.

Claudio had returned from the tea party just as Rosemarie was beginning to worry, noticing that the time for afternoon tea was long since over.

However, when she asked what they talked about from then until the time he entered the bedroom, he said he had barely any recollection of the conversations.

Not knowing what she should talk about, she stood there, not saying a word. Claudio took a seat on the bed in silence, a composed expression on his face.

After a bit of indecision, Rosemarie sat on the opposite side of the bed. Not being able to see his face calmed her down a little. She inhaled slightly before beginning to speak.

“So, I...”

The start of her sentence overlapped with Claudio’s. As she jumped in surprise, she could feel Claudio also correcting his posture from behind her.

This time, she waited for Claudio to say something, but he wasn’t showing any signs of opening his mouth no matter how long she waited. She slowly turned around, catching Claudio at the same moment he began to look at her from over his shoulder. Their eyes met, both their faces and bodies freezing in place. However, it was Claudio that broke the link in their line of sights.

“So, about Adelina...”

Her heart jumped once he brought up that name. Had he changed

his mind? Was he going to report her theft of the Sacred Relic to the Cardinal after all?

“A few moments ago, Bishop Lancel informed me that we’d have a change in chambermaids. When I asked for the reason why, he told me that she requested the change since my face is too terrifying for her to handle.”

That didn’t strike her as particularly odd. She used his face being too frightening as a pretense; she most likely didn’t want to endanger herself by continuing to serve Claudio after her theft of the Sacred Relic had been discovered.

“I see... I suppose that was bound to happen.” Since Adelina was assigned to their room, Rosemarie thought she would have plenty of chances to clear the girl’s misconceptions against Claudio. Now, though, those chances had become a lot slimmer. She would need to start tomorrow by looking for the girl.

As she racked her brain to the best of her abilities, Claudio sighed.

“This isn’t the time to be concerned about others. Right now, you have your *own* issues.”

“Oh, right. You’re right...” She looked down at her pillow, afraid to close her eyes in fear of what might happen after she went to sleep.

“I’ll stay awake; you lie down. If you run amok like you did yesterday, I’ll be here to calm you down again. Rest assured.”

Rosemarie looked at him in surprise. He was supposed to hate her. Why would he say something like that?

“What is with that face? Get to sleep, already.” Claudio cast a dubious look at her. Rosemarie nodded meekly and climbed into bed, albeit confused. The squirrel on her shoulder curled up next to her cheek. Flying squirrels were supposed to be nocturnal, but that didn’t seem to be the case for this particular one.

—“That reminds me, what happened to your bucket? I don’t see it anywhere.”

“Oh, I left it in Heidi’s care. I knew if I just put it in the storage trunk, I’d still be tempted to bring it out...”

“You left it in her care? *You*? Are you running a fever?” Claudio leaned over and worriedly put his hand on Rosemarie’s forehead. Instantly, she had flashbacks to the kiss from that morning, making her quickly pull the comforter over her head to avoid his hand.

“No, no fever! I’m fine! I just thought I would have a go at separating myself from my bucket.” Her face was hot, and she had no doubt it was beet-red as well. She couldn’t see Claudio’s face, but she didn’t want him to see hers looking like this. It would be an open door into her feelings.

She then realized that Claudio was remaining quiet. Rosemarie thought it odd that he wasn’t saying anything and poked her head out

from under the comforter. As soon as she did, she saw Claudio looking at his own hand in a somewhat cool and composed manner.

“Um, is there something the matter?” Claudio’s shoulders shook immensely.

“No, it’s noth... Well, err, yes. Do you mind... if I hold your hand?” Claudio asked curtly. Rosemarie’s face went red again.

“Err, um... Oh! Right! Because I didn’t give you your resupply for today!” Realizing that fact, Rosemarie hurriedly held out her hand. Claudio’s expression seemed slightly perplexed. Nevertheless, he took her hand hesitantly.

(Is it just me... or is Prince Claudio acting a bit too timidly for who he is...? Oh... could it be that he is still sick of me?)

Perhaps he was so tired that he needed to hold her hand despite being opposed to doing so.

That fact weighed heavy in her heart, but as Rosemarie felt the reassuring warmth of his hand in hers, she found herself slipping off into a sound slumber.

—*Come, come, Beloved of the Sacred Beast. Return it, return it, the important—*

She heard a voice akin to the howl of the wind calling incessantly from the darkness. It echoed through her ears, stole her thoughts, and made her feel like her body was being dragged.

She had to go.

That was her only thought as she tried to walk into the darkness, but something was restricting her body from moving forward. She struggled like mad, reaching out to the darkness.

She couldn’t get there, even though she *needed* to go there.

The calling turned to weeping as it called out for her even more with that sorrowful voice.

Her hand suddenly met something dense, and a red-gold light flooded her vision.

“Don’t cry. I’m coming there. I’ll take it to you. Don’t cry, don’t cry—!”

Just then, she heard the sound of something bursting into her ear.

“Rosemarie!”

Someone shouted her name so loudly that it was practically rattling her brain, making Rosemarie’s eyes snap open. She saw Claudio’s desperate face nearby, and the ceiling above past him.

“Prince... Claudio...?”

“You’re awake? How do you feel?” His consoling voice made Rosemarie finally realize that Claudio was hanging over her body and pinning down both her wrists.

“I was... being called in my dream. I needed to go at all costs and I was so desperate to...”

“Yes, you actually tried to leave the room.” Claudio got up and pulled her up off the cold floor. When she sat up, she was greeted with the grim faces of Heidi and Claudio’s three-man entourage standing still in the bedroom. Apparently having gone off elsewhere, the squirrel nimbly flew in and landed on its home base, Rosemarie’s shoulder. As it brought its body next to her cheek, the dread finally settled into her body.

She was being led off to places unknown, not of her own volition. That reality sent shivers through her body. Claudio took Rosemarie’s positively trembling body firmly into his embrace.

“It’s okay. You’re here. No strange voices calling you anymore, right?”

“...No, no strange voices.” The familiar tones of Claudio’s voice and the sounds of her heart beating against her ears helped her regain her cool.

“Volland Princess, look over here.” Edeltraud, seeing that she had calmed down, squatted next to her. Rosemarie timidly turned her head over to them. The Archmagus put their gloved hand on her forehead and stared into her eyes.

“...Nope, no spell over her. Doesn’t... make sense.”

Leaving Edeltraud to ponder with their hand over their mouth, Claudio helped her to her feet, then over to the bed.

Heidi walked out to the lounge, saying she would get Rosemarie something to drink.

“Your Highness, what shall we do with this?” Alto asked Claudio, who sat next to Rosemarie stroking her back. The squire presented him with a dark red jewel with gold shavings—the Sacred Relic.

When she saw it, Rosemarie was overcome with an incomprehensible sense of fear and grabbed hold of Claudio’s arm. Claudio soon realized what had happened. He looked at the Sacred Relic as though it were some detestable thing he’d happened to catch sight of.

“I’ll take it later. In the meantime, take it over to the lounge area. I don’t want to bring it near Rosemarie.”

Alto nodded diligently and gave an emphatic reply of affirmation. Meanwhile, Rosemarie looked fearfully at the Sacred Relic he held in his hands. Claudio intervened and wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

“You took the Sacred Relic off of me and rambled on, ‘I’ll take this to you.’ Do you know where you were trying to take it to?”

She thought, bringing up memories of grabbing ahold of something glowing red-gold in her dream.

“No, I... do not. All I remember hearing was the wind roaring like an animal from out of the darkness...”

“The wind roaring like an animal? That reminds me, you said that you heard it back at the saint’s chapel when we first arrived here, didn’t you?”

“I did, but even though it was just noise, I could understand it as if it were actual words. It said, ‘Come, come, Beloved of the Sacred Beast. Return it, return it.’”

“‘Beloved of the Sacred Beast?’” Edeltraud abruptly cut into the conversation, making Rosemarie tilt her head in confusion.

“Does that help in solving anything?”

“You heard ‘Beloved of the Sacred Beast?’ That’s title Sacred Beasts capable of human speech give to humans they fancy.”

Rosemarie felt an unfamiliar terror come over her and she shook tremendously while Claudio stroked her back consolingly.

“Which means, a sacred beast of some kind is telling Rosemarie to bring the Sacred Relic? Why is it Rosemarie?”

“Don’t know. Must be for some reason. But, do know how she’s being controlled without being under spell. It’s a call; no need for spell.”

Was that even possible? Rosemarie blinked repeatedly, confounded.

“Is it possible for someone’s call alone to move one’s body?” she asked.

“If feelings on same wavelength, it is possible. For example, if Claudio was sad, you’d have urge to go over for support, right? Same principle.” Edeltraud had a point. That was indeed what she did in her dream. In her dream, she had the urge to console that sad *somebody* so badly that it pained her heart.

She squeezed her hands atop her lap and frowned. Claudio propped his head with his hand, a sour expression painted over his face.

“Still, a sacred beast, is it? Since it’s asking for the Sacred Relic, I would assume the Silver Lion is out of the conversation. Which would mean it’s another sacred beast... If it has correlations to this area, could it possibly be the Hippocampus?”

“The Hippocampus...” That was the sacred beast she had seen being used as the motif of all the sculptures and paintings located all over the cathedral. It was even woven in the tapestries that adorned the lounge of the room Rosemarie and the others were lodging in.

“So, are you saying that the sacred beast, known as the Protector of the Seas, is trying to get me to bring him this Sacred Relic?”

“One would naturally assume, yes... But, if it were indeed the case, it shouldn’t matter who it calls out to—you, me, anybody. That

chambermaid, Adelina, could have even sufficed for walking out with the Sacred Relic.”

Which begged the question: why Rosemarie?

She contemplated the answer, but then suddenly stumbled upon one fundamental matter.

“Um, the Sacred Relic was found at the same time Saint Kamil dug up the rock salt, wasn’t it? So, what do they mean by ‘returning’ it?”

Everyone’s bewildered gazes fell upon Rosemarie at once. A bitter smile drew over Fritz’s face.

“Well, Your Highness?” Fritz addressed Claudio, who groaned slightly.

“Well, if the Hippocampus is calling for you, it would mean that humans stole what once belonged to it. And they just said that the saint found it and started up the whole Sacred Relic Worship ceremony. Considering that, it’s no surprise that they suddenly brought this item, said to be hidden under the word of God, out to the public a few decades ago. Nor is it a surprise that it has hints of mana within it.”

Rosemarie was at a loss for words. Claudio had told her before that the legend was either exaggerated or false, but she never would have thought the relic was *stolen* from the Hippocampus.

“Ah, I see. That would mean that the traces of mana are in the holy water as well, and you’d be able to manipulate people with mana by making them drink it, then? So, there’s a chance that our mystery sorcerer is really the Hippocampus...? That would also mean the animal carcasses are a result of...”

As Rosemarie heard Claudio murmuring his thoughts aloud beside her, she could almost feel her and everyone else getting wrapped up in the complicated situation bit by bit, suffocating her.

“At any rate, this is all simply conjecture. None of us has actually seen the Hippocampus, nor is it necessarily a given that the Hippocampus is the one calling Rosemarie. We don’t have any evidence.”

The mysteries seemed never-ending. While they knew who was responsible for stealing the Sacred Relic, there was still the case of the animal carcasses being left on the altar—the same case that Claudio insisted didn’t concern any of them. Fritz seemed to struggle with finding a motivation behind the decision to start drinking holy water a year ago, too.

“Perhaps if we try heeding the call, we could uncover a lot of information...”

“Don’t be foolish. What would happen if the unspeakable were to happen as a result of that?” scoffed Claudio, displeased with Rosemarie’s suggestion as she dropped her shoulders.

“I’m... sorry. But you’re right. If something were to happen to the Sacred Relic or you, Prince Claudio, it *would* mean the unspeakable, wouldn’t it?”

“Are we on the same page? I’m talking about something happening to *you*, not *me*.”

“Oh, yes, because you might lose your mana. I hadn’t put enough thought into that.”

“That is *not* the point I’m trying to make here...” Claudio put a hand to his forehead in exasperation, making Rosemarie cock her head to the side. What was the point he was making here?

That was when Fritz started chuckling aloud.

“Oh, boy. Your Highness, can’t you ever just use your words?”

“Reap what you sow.” Edeltraud clapped their hands, not wearing an actual smile but looking entertained nonetheless.

“I’m already well aware of that, thank you!” Claudio shot the both of them a bitter glare, then turned toward Rosemarie again—and then immediately turned his head away. She could see his face from the side. It was slightly red.

“...If anything were to happen to you, I doubt I could ever find a smile in anything ever again.”

Rosemarie felt her own face getting red, partially induced by Claudio. She couldn’t find it in herself to look his way, so she averted her eyes.

(What is going on with Prince Claudio? Wasn’t he supposed to be fed up with me?)

Doubts reared their heads, but her hand grabbed onto the sleeve of Claudio’s jacket.

“...Okay. I will not mention any more foolish ideas.”

Rosemarie knew well that he was worried about her. Although that prospect thrilled her, she wasn’t confident that his words were coming from the same mindset as hers.

“I would appreciate that,” Claudio said, his tone relieved. As she heard that, Rosemarie gently tugged on the sleeve of his jacket still in her hand in lieu of a nod.

—Eeeeeek!

It was the morning three days prior to the Sacred Relic Worship ceremony. Rosemarie awakened to the sounds of Heidi’s screams.

Claudio wasn’t in the bedroom; he’d insisted on sleeping out in the lounge after the ruckus that ensued from Rosemarie’s sleepwalking yet again the night before. Heidi was supposed to be in the room instead, but Rosemarie couldn’t spot her anywhere, either.

Rosemarie sprang to her feet, preparing to leave the bedroom, but

the flying squirrel that had just now been sleeping beside her clung to the doorknob to prevent her from doing so. Just as she went to grab it, she noticed it was there and quickly pulled her hand away.

"Momo, you have to get out of the way." As she tugged gently at the scruff of its neck, the squirrel started squeaking at her in protest. Although she had her suspicions, she tried to pull the critter off. Almost as soon as she had done so, the door opened from the other side.

"Rosemarie, are you awake?" Claudio showed himself, his expression tense. Rosemarie quickly caught the squirrel as it tumbled off the doorknob, and her face turned pale in fear of what might have happened.

"Did something happen to Heidi?!" She exited into the lounge, pushing past Claudio, to find Heidi collapsed and Alto holding her, his back facing Rosemarie.

"Heidi?!"

Alto placed Heidi on the couch and Rosemarie ran to her. Rosemarie wondered what sort of horrifying thing might have happened to Heidi as she knelt on the floor next to the maid. She put a hand on Heidi's forehead—a black cat's forehead—and Heidi's tightly-shut green eyes slowly began to open.

"Ughh, Princess, I saw it." The normally brave Heidi pressed a hand to her mouth, tears in her eyes. As she stroked Heidi's face, Rosemarie turned to Claudio and Alto, who were both staring at a spot just outside the door leading into the passageway.

"Um, what is..."

"You need to stay back. We don't want a repeat of what happened to Heidi. This time it's a goat," Claudio said with a grimace, making Rosemarie's heart skip a beat uncomfortably. Heidi pushed herself up groggily and held on to Rosemarie's hand.

"I heard a sound, so Squire Clausen opened the door into the passage. Once he did, I saw what appeared to be a goat carcass with no eyes, and... But it was so strange!"

"It certainly is, but... in some other special way?"

"Its body was shriveled up and dry. It was hard to tell because of its fur, but it was skin and bones. Flat all around, almost as if it had all the blood drawn from its body..." Heidi's body shook all over tremendously as Rosemarie held her, which prevented her from stopping her own sense of fear from running through her form.

(Were the rat and the rabbit both in the same shape, I wonder...?)

She didn't know any of the details, but according to what Heidi just told her, the other two cases in the past most likely involved the animals being dried out as well.

This was no longer looking like a human's handiwork *at all*.

Claudio finished talking with Alto near the passageway and turned his glum face over to Rosemarie.

“Why would they leave that carcass in front of our room like that...?”

“No clue. But I’m going to call for Bishop Lancel before this turns into a circus.” Claudio pulled the cord for the attendant bell in the corner of the room.

As he did, Rosemarie slipped back into the bedroom, grabbed a sheet, and walked over to where Alto was standing near the entrance. Perhaps not finding this sight all that terrifying, Alto’s head, outside of the fine pair of deer antlers, remained human.

“Your Highness, if you were planning on draping that over the goat, please allow me instead.”

“No, but...” She was a tad hesitant, but she found no point in trying to argue now of all times, so she obediently handed the sheet over to him. Heidi was trying to rise from the couch, but Rosemarie stopped her before she was able to, taking a seat next to her.

“Fritz and Master Edel left for morning worship about an hour ago, but it wasn’t there when they did. So, when was it placed here, then?”

It wasn’t long after Claudio started pondering that Ilse came to them. He was probably in the middle of morning worship, but he apparently knew that he had been summoned—the means of how the signal traveled to him remaining a mystery. Ilse’s head was that of a gray bird, probably incited by displeasure from being called so early in the morning.

“What in the...” As soon as Ilse lifted up the sheet draped over the goat carcass, his dusky yellow-orange beak opened slightly in surprise.

“Bishop Lancel, did the previous carcasses look something like this as well?”

“Yes, indeed they did. However, His Eminence gave me orders to keep any details a secret due to its all too disturbing nature...”

“Have you not investigated why they’re like this?” Claudio squinted as he asked his question, to which Ilse hesitantly shook his head.

“No, outside of giving them a proper burial, nothing else.”

“Are you searching for who the culprit might be?”

“Yes, we have been attending to that matter, but have made no headway as of yet. We aren’t able to conduct a full-scale investigation as of right now, you see.”

“As of *right now*, eh? Understandable, I suppose,” Claudio said, giving a little sneer. Ilse, on the other hand, kept himself firm and bowed his head, the three plumage feathers on the back of his head shaking as he did.

“Indeed. With the many visitors we have in attendance, we are obliged to keep any commotion to a minimum. However, now that this has turned into a bit of a serious situation, we will hasten our investigation. I do hope that, by doing so, it will help appease the anger you are so rightfully feeling, sir.”

Claudio stared at Ilse’s head intently before calmly nodding.

“Very well. I’ll leave the rest up to you.”

Ilse gave a cordial word of thanks and a bow of his head, which reverted back to human form. No doubt he was relieved that he was able to reason with Claudio.

Lifting up the sheet-wrapped goat carcass in his arms, Ilse made his exit through the door that Alto opened for him.

“Looks like we’re going to have to get involved with searching for the culprit after all.” Claudio sighed in a low tone the moment Ilse left the room, confusing Rosemarie.

“Were you not going to leave that up to Bishop Lancel?”

“When Bishop Lancel said that he would ‘hasten the investigation,’ what form was he in?”

Despite thinking it odd that Claudio answered her question with a question, she thought back and gave a proper response, regardless.

“His head was that of a gray bird.”

“As I suspected. His talk of hastening the investigation was likely a lie.”

“But he could just be...” She was about to suggest that he could have just been frightened of Claudio, but hesitated.

“You think that he was frightened of me? I sincerely doubt someone frightened would be able to express their opinion to me with such a strong and steady attitude.” Claudio, his head still propped on his head, gave a slightly cynical smile.

“I’d venture that the Cardinal and the upper brass of the Holy Land are putting any kind of resolution on hold. No people have been harmed as of yet. More importantly, the Sacred Relic’s disappearance is a far more pressing matter.”

Claudio patted the area over his breast pocket that held the Sacred Relic, a sight which made Rosemarie feel sorry for all the people of the Holy Land who were probably tirelessly searching for the relic. Apparently, despite saying that he wanted to keep it away from Rosemarie, he still had no intention of returning it.

“Then again, I assume Bishop Lancel isn’t pleased with that decision. So much so that he told me the state of the other carcasses, despite being under orders from the Cardinal to keep it under wraps.”

“If that were the case, do you think that Bishop Lancel would cooperate with us?”

“While there’s a chance, we shouldn’t try asking for his

cooperation. He seems like the type who is totally devoted to his superiors.” It would have made their lives a little easier to have someone on their side in the cathedral, but it seemed that they wouldn’t be gaining one so easily.

(I wonder if there is any way I can help...)

She wasn’t capable as a fighter, nor was she very quick-witted. As far as her skill sets, they boiled down to stealing mana and seeing the heads of people with negative emotions as beasts. That was it. Given that, what could she do by utilizing those two things?

“I was hoping to ignore this if at all possible, but someone placed that carcass right at our doorstep. So, I’m taking this as a declaration of war.”

Claudio’s lips curled into a war-minded smile, making Rosemarie’s brows slant in concern.

“Please, I beg of you not to do anything drastic. If anything were to happen to you, Prince Claudio, I, too, would end up never smiling again.”

As she stared at Claudio in genuine concern from across the table, his face got redder and redder until he covered his mouth with one hand and looked away from her.

“That... is what I said, isn’t it? I see,” Claudio whispered under his breath. Rosemarie caught the words and nodded very deliberately toward the still-blushing Claudio.

“Yes, indeed you did. Last night, Prince Claudio, if I recall—”

“I get it. I get it already, so say no more. I’m begging you; don’t repeat it. Please.”

Claudio leaned over and covered her mouth with his palm. Rosemarie nodded, her eyes as wide as saucers, and Claudio eventually released his hand—followed by a pinch on the cheek as a parting note.

“Excuse me, what are you doing?”

“A bit of payback. It’s your fault for not getting it.”

“But... I *do* get it. You said, last night, and I quote—”

“I *told* you, no more.”

—Um, while your lovely display of horseplay brings the biggest of smiles to my face, may I remind you both that it is just about time for breakfast. Also, please do not forget that your ever-faithful maid is sitting right here.”

Heidi, who had been sitting next to Rosemarie the whole time, hesitantly spoke up in similar fashion to a time before. The two snapped back to reality and quickly turned their red faces away from one another at nearly the same time. Before Rosemarie could process what had happened, Claudio stood straight up.

“Right. Let’s hurry, then. If we head to the dining hall, then we

might get to hear something from the rumor mill about the carcass incidents.”

Rosemarie went after Claudio as he attempted to zip out of the room. A certain idea had dawned on her when she heard the words “dining hall” and “rumor mill,” but she tightened her jaw with some slight hesitation.

(But can I even do it? No... can I do it? I *will* do it.)

She convinced herself, lightly tugging on Claudio’s jacket.

“Um, about that... There is actually something I’d like permission to try.”

Claudio turned back, looking doubtful. Rosemarie then voiced her suggestion, her resolve firm.

The clattering of dishes, the voices of the people, and the bustle from the servers—all of it filled Rosemarie’s ears as she took her seat at the breakfast table. Although Heidi was standing right next to her with a composed demeanor, Claudio was nowhere to be seen.

(My nerves have killed my taste buds...)

She brought the bland wheat porridge to her mouth and managed to get it down.

However, even though she was the one who suggested this idea, she never thought that she would get this faint of heart simply due to Heidi being present and Claudio being absent.

This was her suggestion to Claudio just before he left the room: just as she had perceived that Ilse was lying earlier, she could use her eyes to find the culprit who’d been leaving animal carcasses around.

However, Rosemarie needed to act alone in order for the plan to work, which was the biggest hurdle. If she were with Claudio, his Silver Lion head would scare everyone into having beast heads, which would end up muddling the obvious.

Claudio was naturally opposed, but she eventually got his approval after practically begging him.

“Well, princess?” Heidi suddenly whispered out to her. Rosemarie gave a slight shake of her head without turning around to face the maid.

“This might not work. Almost everyone here has a beast head.” It was probably already common knowledge that she was Claudio’s wife. Not only did no one come up to speak to her, but the majority of intermittent glances directed at her came from beast eyes. That was another likely reason why she had no taste for her meal.

The squirrel, which clung to her shoulders while hiding under her hair, edged up slightly.

Rosemarie had tried to leave it back in the room when she left,

but it wouldn't move an inch. Claudio even tried pulling it off, but it bit him and quickly hissed back at him, so she was left with no other recourse but to take it with her. However, considering the circumstances now, it was filling in the role of a comfort buddy and helping her calm down just a bit.

Some time passed with the situation remaining the same. Just as her hopes were deflating and she thought her plan was a dud, a familiar-looking waitress with a set of brown pigtail braids passed by the table.

"Adelina?" She found herself uttering the girl's name, and the girl turned around with a smile.

"Yes? Would you like some... tea...?" Adelina swung around with her teapot in hand, her eyes wide with astonishment. Her head then wasted no time transforming into that of an orange-pelted weasel. She looked like she was about to make an exit, but she reconsidered and turned back around to face Rosemarie, pouring her a cup of tea in silence.

"Thank you. Um... how are you feeling? Nothing out of the ordinary?"

Adelina curtsied and attempted to make a hasty retreat, but those words stopped her in her tracks.

"Why are you asking me that?" she asked in a wary voice, which made Rosemarie falter for a second, but she quickly recovered and spoke up.

"You were under a spell. One that amplified your hatred. But it's okay, the spell is broken. I was just worried about any lasting problems as a result..."

Adelina tightened her grip on the teapot handle. Her facial expression wasn't distinguishable in weasel form, but her pair of brown eyes looked rather shaken up.

"...I've been physically out of sorts for about a year. My mind has been a mess and I was always sluggish. But all that stopped once I left your room yesterday..."

Her weasel face warped back into human form, and then back into weasel form again. With Adelina putting her emotions on display, Rosemarie silently waited for to finish what she had to say.

The young girl shook her head a few times as if to shake away her indecision, went to the other side of the table near Rosemarie, and drew close to her ear.

"—So, why haven't you turned me over to the Cardinal? I've committed a major crime in stealing the Sacred Relic."

Her weasel whiskers grazed Rosemarie's cheek for a second before withdrawing. Rosemarie widened her eyes for a second upon seeing Adelina back up, but she quickly grabbed on to her hand. She

followed that up by standing up and heading toward the exit of the dining hall, tracking Heidi following behind her calmly in her peripheral vision.

“Wait, where do you think you’re taking me?” Adelina protested in a hushed tone, not being able to shake off an aristocrat’s hand in front of such a large group of people. She only shook it off once they exited into the passageways and reached a spot with no signs of life.

“What in the world is going on? Why did you bring me out here?”

“This isn’t something we can openly discuss around that many people, don’t you think?” As they stood in the passageway decorated in complex floral patterns, Rosemarie stared at Adelina firmly. She knew that if she didn’t clear up her misconceptions now, there wouldn’t be another chance to do so.

“Prince Claudio has his reasons as to why he can’t return the Sacred Relic just yet, so he said that he would hold off reporting who stole the relic to the Cardinal for now.”

“*For now?* I don’t give a damn about that beast’s reasoning, but if you’re going to turn me in, then you might as well get on with it,” Adelina said with a bitter scoff, but she was likely afraid since she didn’t know what she would be charged with; her shoulders shivered ever so slightly. The display broke Rosemarie’s heart. She shook her head.

“—No, I don’t wish to do that. Not only did this all start from a misconception about Prince Claudio, but a spell had been manipulating you. Also, we haven’t been harmed and I don’t think there’s any need to turn you in.”

“You can think that all you’d like, but I tried to frame you all for a crime you didn’t commit. One mistake and it might mean the death sentence, and you’re telling me that you understand that in full?”

Adelina’s pair of brown eyes glared at Rosemarie, casting doubt. Rosemarie, on the other hand, focused on her calmly.

“I understand. But if you really had as much of a hate-fueled death wish for us as you claim, then you wouldn’t *warn* us that it was dangerous to walk around by ourselves due to the rat carcass issue on the first day.”

“...?!” Adelina’s face warped around.

“Why do you remember such a minute detail...?” Her face wavered between weasel and human until it slowly situated itself back to human form, with its expression being one of utter amazement.

“You know... you’re pretty brash for someone with such an innocent face. I told you that you’re ‘drunk off of being kind and compassionate,’ but it doesn’t seem like you learned anything at all. I mean, you did marry that beast of a prince, after all. Also, I get the real strong sense that you’re ridiculously naive and trusting.” Adelina

breathed a deep sigh, but a small smile formed on her lips.

“... I think I’ll write that letter—to the kids at the orphanage. I still don’t trust whatever it is your husband says, but I want to know if everyone is living free of worries.”

Rosemarie gave a sigh of relief and dropped her shoulders. That hadn’t erased her crime, but it made all the difference between having her see reason and not, regardless.

“...Um, would you mind giving the letter to me? I’ll be happy to deliver it,” Rosemarie timidly requested. Adelina eyeballed her before eventually giving a mute shake of her head.

“You don’t need to go that far. I don’t think I’ll finish writing it before it’s time for the lot of you to go home. Then again, you seem like the type to offer to stay until I can finish, all things considered...” said Adelina with a wry smile, her face once again morphing into a weasel for some reason. A chill ran down Rosemarie’s spine as she wondered whether the change might be a sign of something else. After a short pause, Adelina finally spoke up.

“—So, hey. Did you drink that holy water?”

“Huh? Um, well... you see, I accidentally spilled it and neither Claudio nor I drank of it.” Caught on the back foot by the lack of context behind the question, she accidentally let the truth slip.

She never received another goblet after the squirrel tipped it over, but she wondered if that was somehow not the right choice.

However, Adelina patted her chest upon hearing that Rosemarie hadn’t drunk it.

“If you haven’t drunk it, then I believe that you should leave this place. Everyone acts a tad strange once they drink of the holy water. They become unable to contain their anger like me, start moping around, and things of that nature.”

“Do you mean... they have a spell cast over them like with you?”

“I don’t know, but I think chances are high.”

Claudio had speculated that the Sacred Relic had mana, and that the holy water might take on that mana and cast a spell on those who drank it. That speculation seemed to be coming true. The reality of the situation filled Rosemarie with a sense of anxiety.

“Prince Claudio also seemed to have his doubts about the holy water, but... Um, did you know that they didn’t drink it up until last year?” Claudio said that Fritz told him that.

Adelina nodded slightly, weasel head and all. “Yes, I knew. They never used to drink it, but ever since around this time last year, they started letting people drink it. Although, I’m not sure as to why that came to be myself.”

Fritz had been investigating the cause, but it seemed as though Adelina had no clue, either. If everyone suffered the same

abnormalities, then it wasn't surprising that no one would really know the answer.

"I appreciate the warning. However, we cannot just pack up and leave. The Sacred Relic Worship ceremony is not the only thing we're here for. It's for Prince Claudio's sake, as well." Their original goal was to meet with Lene, the former guardsman of the Forbidden Forest, just as Claudio had mentioned. But they wouldn't be able to unless the Sacred Relic Worship were to be held without a hitch.

Adelina's face eased back into human form. This might have been the first time Rosemarie had ever dealt with someone who kept slipping between human and beast in such a short time as much as this girl did. Yet she wasn't scared, not even for a second; but it might have been her determination keeping her nerves in check.

"...Well, regardless of what you're all here for, it has nothing to do with me. Oh... that reminds me, you were in the middle of breakfast, weren't you? I'm sure they've already cleaned up everything, but I can make an exception and prepare something for you."

Adelina shrugged her shoulders and started walking. Rosemarie looked at Heidi, who had remained out of the conversation up until that point, and she looked at her in turn; they both chuckled. She was likely a helpful and caring girl on the inside.

With one of her concerns put behind her, Rosemarie felt a load taken off her shoulders. But as soon as they approached the entrance to the dining hall, Rosemarie was alarmed as she saw Adelina's head snapping back into weasel form as she walked ahead of her.

"Hey, so, why were you eating by yourself anyway? Where is your husband?"

"Huh? ...Oh, that. Well... I had a bit of a fight with Prince Claudio, and he told me to go on ahead..."

She couldn't just come out and say that she was having breakfast alone so that she could find the culprit behind the animal carcass dumpings. Rosemarie managed to eke out an excuse after a bit of stammering, which made her fret over whether Adelina was growing suspicious, but the girl just whispered to her in reply.

"Humph, so, the husband leaves his irritating wife to enjoy his meal with another lady."

Rosemarie looked over to where Adelina jerked her chin to find the strong-willed Princess of Kavan, Suzette, sitting in the usual corner of the dining room—along with Claudio, eating and smiling.

She was so shocked that she couldn't speak.

(But why? Prince Claudio was supposed to be waiting for me to return back at the room...)

Rosemarie stood in silence as Heidi huddled to her side, her head gradually transforming into that of a black cat.

“*Whatever* is going through that head of Prince Claudio’s? Here you are, trying your hardest at an unfamiliar task, and there he is doing... well... *that!* Wait here, princess. I’m going to give him a little *piece* of my mind!”

Heidi was fuming and ready to go charging in at any moment, but Rosemarie came back to reality and hurriedly held her back before she could.

“Hold on, Heidi. I’m sure there’s a perfectly logical—”

“Your Highness! Thank the stars you’re safe! I lost sight of you and went in search.” Alto’s panicked voice greeted them from the end of the path. Taken aback, she looked in the direction it came from. There she saw the knight’s great antlers and deer head gradually morphing back into human form as he ran up to them.

It had almost slipped her mind that she practically abandoned Alto, who had followed on bodyguard duty, in the dining hall.

“My apologies, Squire Clausen... I neglected to tell you before slipping out the hall.”

“Think nothing of it. You being safe is all that matters. Prince Claudio was also gripped with concern...”

“You mean her husband, sitting over there, partaking in a jovial meal as we speak? Is that what you call gripped with concern, Squire?” Adelina, clearly annoyed, cut into their conversation.

Alto was shocked by the sudden third-party interruption, but he quickly returned his attention to Rosemarie—at which point, his eyes darted around the room in panic.

“That... is a misunderstanding. His Highness was becoming anxious over your status and came here to the dining hall to check on you. Once he realized you weren’t here, he was going to go off in search of you, but he happened to...”

“He happened to run into Princess Suzette, yes?” Rosemarie said, finishing Alto’s sentence, pushing back her confusion and calmly uttering her name. The knight then stood straight in a refined yet humble manner.

“Yes, milady. The Princess of Kavan invited His Highness to partake in a meal with her, and he declined her offer. However, the Princess of Kavan has an... inordinately threatening demeanor, so to speak.”

Rosemarie inferred what Alto was trying to explain to her and looked over at Claudio, Suzette, and his entourage once again. A moment ago, she thought the smile on his face was one of joy, but upon closer inspection, it seemed more pasted-on—a textbook example of a fake smile. However, Edeltraud stood behind him with a slightly stiffer expression than usual.

(Does he think that Princess Suzette is under a spell? If that’s the

case...)

Would the spell be broken if she were to touch her like she did with Adelina?

Rosemarie rashly tried to step foot into the dining hall, but Alto circled in front of her to stop her, a stern expression on his face.

"I must ask you to wait. If you were to go over there, I fear it will just add fuel to the fire. You would be far too conspicuous over there. Seeing as how Mage Edeltraud is over there, I would assume worrying is unnecessary."

"Yes, but..."

It was true, she couldn't say with any confidence that Suzette wouldn't start lashing out and making cruel remarks as Adelina did. And while she understood that this was the wrong place completely, even if Edeltraud was standing at the ready in case something happened, the fact that Suzette was sitting right next to Claudio and might be under the influence of magic only made her more uneasy. Not willing to let Rosemarie's concerns go by the wayside, Adelina quickly raised her hand.

"I am not quite sure what is going on here, but all you need is the Princess of Kavan out of your husband's hair, right? What if I were to spill some water on the princess's clothes?"

"You know, I just had the same idea, Adelina. Clever girl." Heidi signaled her agreement, and the two set off.

"W-Wait, you two. The both of you need to calm down."

Just as before, Rosemarie hurried to stop them.

"Why? I hate married men who are lovesick over another woman with their wife around, but I also hate girls who try to court a married man when they know their wife is around. It will be fine. It's *just* water." Despite Adelina's weasel face, Rosemarie could tell that she was smiling wickedly.

"Please, no. You or Heidi could end up getting hurt." She just couldn't shake the feeling that interrupting the princess's time with Claudio would result in her doing something completely unexpected, especially given that she might be under the influence of a spell.

As Rosemarie remained firm and shook her head at the black cat and weasel-headed girls both voicing their displeasure, Alto suddenly gasped in surprise.

"Oh."

Rosemarie tracked Alto's slack-jawed gaze. What she saw made her understandably disappointed.

Suzette, sitting next to Claudio, was not only snuggling up to his arm, but also stroking his forehead.

The second she saw that, Rosemarie tossed all of her reservations out the window.

“Princess?”

“Please, wait, Your Highness!”

Heidi’s bewildered cry and Alto’s attempts at stopping Rosemarie fell on deaf ears as she briskly cut into the dining hall and walked up to Claudio’s side.

“—Rosemarie! Where have you been?” Claudio turned around, a look of relief on his face. The nearby Suzette shot an intimidating glare at her as her head instantly changed into a dirty-brown dog’s head.

“Prince Claudio.” She called his name and slowly touched his face. Whether he was holding her hand in order to remove it from him was uncertain, but he released it regardless. Then he started to reach out to Rosemarie—

But Rosemarie delivered a devastating headbutt straight to his prominent forehead.

“Grk...! What do you think you’re—”



Looking at Claudio as she held her spinning head, she saw that he was glaring at her with a combination of anger and astonishment, but she cut him off in mid-sentence.

“...Don’t you dare let her touch your forehead!” she screamed, letting the tears flow freely from her eyes as she turned herself around.

“Wait a second, Rosemarie. My forehead? What are you on about? Hey, wait! Princess Suzette, let go!” Claudio’s flustered-sounding voice got farther away. Was he not following after her because Suzette was being persistent in not letting him go?

Before she realized, she ran past Heidi and Alto and dashed out of the dining hall. Before she could run away, someone grabbed her hand and she quickly tried to wriggle free.

“Let me go!!”

“No, you’ve got to calm yourself. You’re pretty interesting, so I’m going to show you a place where your husband won’t be able to find you for a while,” said a particularly amused-sounding voice. Rosemarie looked in the direction it came from to find the weasel-headed Adelina standing there. Once she laid eyes on that broad smile on hers, she refocused herself, coming back to her senses.

Claudio had tried to chase after Rosemarie as she ran away crying without an ounce of honor or shame, but Suzette’s slender arms were wrapped around his waist. He pried her arms off of him and then wrenched one, irritated.

“Enough.” Thinking that this princess was to blame for Rosemarie shedding tears, he couldn’t contain how irritated he was. He wanted to hurry up and get to the bottom of why the ever-docile Rosemarie would act in such a jealous rage.

“I say, Prince Claudio, that does smart.” Even though he had a strong enough grip on her arm to make it turn red, Suzette only grimaced slightly, showing little sign of pain. Something about that unsettled him.

(This isn’t right.)

It was the same when he ran into her at the entrance to the dining hall earlier. Not only did she not budge an inch despite his efforts to shake her off, she pulled his arm with a cackle and invited him to come eat with her. Even the maid that had been attending to her like her shadow looked somewhat off and didn’t show any signs of stopping her mistress.

“Claudio, crowd is odd, too. Making this much noise, but hardly anyone caring,” Edeltraud said vigilantly from behind Claudio.

There was barely anyone left in the dining room, but it wasn't a small number by any means. But the few who were there hadn't been paying the scene much attention. There were some among them peeking over in interest now and then, but they were the minority.

(So... the whole place is under a spell.)

The dining hall on the first day they came to the Holy Land was a little livelier. It may have been morning, but there shouldn't have been so few people. Even if some were cooped up in their rooms, the low number was still abnormal. Now that there was a bit of an uproar, he finally noticed how strangely quiet it was.

"Master Edel, let's go. I'm worried about Rosemarie."

Claudio practically thrust Suzette's arm away and turned around. He heard the girl's chuckling from behind, but he left the dining hall without once turning around.

A strong wind blew up from under the cliff, sending Rosemarie's hair in all directions.

Keeping it in check, Rosemarie felt the wind for the first time in what seemed like ages, inhaling deeply. The flying squirrel, maintaining its usual post on Rosemarie's shoulder, desperately held to the base of her neck so that it wouldn't get blown away.

"Princess! Look at how far you're able to see here. Doesn't it just tickle you that there's so much of nothing? Oh! Look at how high the waves are."

"Heidi, be careful you don't fall. Squire Clausen, you needn't mind me; please, take in the scenery," said Rosemarie to both Heidi, who peered off below the cliff while leaning over the handrail like a child, and Alto, who was standing diligently near the stairs leading down. She then turned around to the Bishop assigned as their caretaker, silently standing behind her.

"Bishop Lancel, I appreciate you bringing us here very much. It has helped calm me down."

"Think nothing of it. I was curious when Adelina came to me, but I am quite glad that this has settled your nerves." Ilse's head wasn't that of a gray bird today, so his neatly braided hair was visible, not a strand being thrown out of order by the strong winds. Like his hair, his expression remained still and tranquil.

Adelina had offered to show Rosemarie a place where Claudio wouldn't find her when she ran from him—it was the aboveground portion of the cathedral's belfry.

However, Adelina said that she couldn't go because she still had work to attend to, roped in Bishop Ilse from out of nowhere, and let him show the way instead.

(I still would have never guessed that behind those paths, there would be *even more* paths.)

The thought had never crossed her mind that behind the walls of the complex underground passageways would be *even more* ant-colony-esque winding passageways. Apparently almost the entire staff of the church used them, which shed some light on how Ilse managed to get to their room so fast when they called for him that morning.

Upon reaching the scenic location through the confusing maze of corridors, she finally realized just how much a breath of fresh air this was after being cooped up stiflingly underground for so long.

The inside of the belfry was devoid of the intricate sculptures and statues that were so common underground. The only exception was the lone hanging bell in the belfry, which had a Hippocampus engraved onto it that was so dynamic it practically looked alive.

“Our rules state that general attendants are not allowed to come up here. The only other person allowed to make their way up here is our bell-ringer, so I assure you that you can rest your weary hearts and enjoy your stay. Although, as your maid has stated, the only thing you can view is the sea,” said Ilse, almost as though he knew how socially awkward she was. That made Rosemarie feel a bit ashamed, but she was grateful nonetheless.

“Oh, no. I’ve never seen the sea before coming to the Holy Land, so it is a welcome change of pace. I can also see myself getting used to its scent.” Inhaling the aroma of the salt water was helping her ground herself even more.

Then, the sudden realization that she’d headbutted Claudio in the dining hall came back to her. She went pale. That little antic was bound to make her fall even more out of favor with Claudio, and she dreaded to think what Suzette might do.

(I ran out of there in a moment of blind passion, but I have to wonder if he is all right... Also, I screamed at him to not let her touch his forehead. What has come over me?)

Even if it were a case of extreme jealousy, what right did she have to be jealous? When it was all said and done, she butted heads with Claudio—quite literally. If she had done it to Suzette instead, it might have at least helped break the spell she was likely under. She wanted to ask Heidi for her bucket back, so she could crawl into a hole with it on. Nevertheless, she disliked Suzette putting her hands all over Claudio.

“Princess Rosemarie, you hail from Volland, correct? I can see why you would come to admire the sea after living amongst primarily pasture and farmland. I was once the same.”

“You were the same? Are you originally from Volland as well, Bishop Lancel?”

“Yes, in my childhood.”

She gasped in surprise. Heidi came over, as if in response to the sound.

“Princess? Is something the matter?”

“Heidi, Bishop Lancel here apparently hails from Volland.”

Heidi gave a gasp herself with eyes widened, and Ilse gave a faint smile.

“I have been many places in my travels, but I was never more enthralled than when I first laid eyes on the sea.” Ilse smiled comfortably as he waxed nostalgic. Rosemarie also found herself pleased, as nostalgia for their shared homeland welled from inside her.

“Have you been in the Holy Land long?”

“No, I arrived here a year or so ago. I was called forth because of the lack of available hands at the Sacred Relic Worship last year. After which, they graciously allowed me the privilege of serving here.” He seemed so acclimated to the way of things here, Rosemarie would never have guessed he was only a year into his stay. That was probably a testament to how capable he was.

(Still, if he’s been a year, that would be around the time people here started drinking the holy water... right?)

The events lined up rather mysteriously. She knew something had happened, but what was it?

As she pondered tangentially, she realized that she had finally calmed herself down. Her thoughts turned to concern over having left Claudio the way she did.

As though guessing what she was thinking, Ilse suggested that they all return. He started walking from his position near the descending staircase. She started to follow him down the stairs, but was stopped by a whisper in her ear from the bishop.

“A falling-out with Prince Claudio right now is dangerous. These lands are cursed.”

She looked in his direction in shock, but by the time she did, he was already descending the staircase. The back of his head didn’t sport the gray bird’s unique plumage... which meant he was speaking the truth. The word “cursed” made her feel as though a cold breeze was blowing across her spine.

It left her guessing about how much Ilse really knew and whether it was a good idea to press for answers right here and now.

While she was left guessing, however, she caught sight of someone preparing to come up the staircase from the lower floor. The person ascending this spiral staircase, which was smaller than the one used to descend into the cathedral, was a member of clergy; Rosemarie pieced together that it was most likely the one assigned as the midday bell-

ringer.

The bell-ringer seemed surprised to see Rosemarie and the others descending. But upon looking Ilse in the eye, he reserved his comments, gave a curt bow of his head, and started his climb up the stairs.

As she watched him ascend, she caught a glimpse of the Hippocampus-engraved bell.

With the midday bell's toll sending them off from behind, Rosemarie descended the spiral staircase, lost in thought.

Chapter 5: The Voiceless Speaker

She was starting to feel like a mole.

They descended from the belfry into the cathedral below. How grandiose it was made no difference; with it never seeing the light of day, its dreary atmosphere, and the inability to see what might be lurking in the darkness past the light of the candles, she was filled with a sense of fear.

Rosemarie timidly looked out at the darkness as she walked the complex series of back routes that Ilse led her through. From behind, Heidi and Alto's footsteps echoed in an odd manner that only served to fuel her dread even more.

"It is time for lunch. Would you prefer to go to your room or the dining hall?"

"The room will be fine for now," Rosemarie answered Ilse as they walked, choosing to retire to her room instead. She had no idea where Claudio was, but she knew that even if he wasn't back at the room, he would eventually come back if she were to just wait.

Staring at Ilse's long braided hair in front of her, she recalled the words the bishop had said to her not too long ago.

—A falling-out with Prince Claudio right now is dangerous. These lands are cursed.

(Should I ask what he meant by that?)

She was clueless as to why he'd uttered those words to her. But his head was human when he did, leading her to believe that he wasn't trying to deceive them.

As she waited for her chance to ask her question, steeling herself for whatever news it might bring, they reached the door leading from the cramped byway into the more spacious main path.

Past that door, Rosemarie assumed, it would be more difficult for Ilse to answer any questions, so she rushed to speak up.

"Um, Bishop Lancel, may I ask—"

"—Were you waiting for us to return, Prince Claudio?"

As soon as Ilse opened the door, the name of her husband (and the receiver of her headbutt not too long ago) came from his mouth.

Rosemarie tensed up as Ilse moved himself out of the way. There he was in front of them: Claudio, leaning against the wall near the door, his intrepid brow furrowed and his arms folded in quite the displeased manner.

His forehead was tinged pink. Rosemarie's face tensed up fiercely. (It's still red...! Wait, was my headbutt really that strong?)

She started walking over to Claudio, her heart filled with remorse and guilt. Once she did, Claudio firmly grasped her wrist without so much as looking at her.

"Bishop Lancel, my wife has put you out due to my carelessness. I'll take it from here. Return to your duties, please," said Claudio, causing Ilse to glance at Rosemarie. He soon bowed, however, and left for elsewhere. Claudio started walking, not watching the bishop depart. Rosemarie followed, being dragged along for the ride, but she finally found the silence unbearable and opened her mouth.

"Um, I am sorry for causing you so much distress. Does your, um, forehead still hurt? And whatever happened to Princess Suzette?"

She tried apologizing and throwing out a couple of questions, but Claudio wasn't replying. And although he wasn't, his hand stayed firmly affixed so that she wouldn't run off again. He must have been awfully upset, an idea that made her flinch as she looked at his back.

When they made their silent return to the room, Fritz was there, and he untensed himself in relief—behavior that was a departure from his usual aloof self.

"Oh, thank goodness. You're safe."

"Did something happen?"

Rosemarie started to go pale at the thought of what Suzette might have done in the time she was nonchalantly taking in the scenery from the belfry. When she asked for details, Claudio pulled her in again with the same hand he'd had on her ever since they got back to the room.

"Tell me when Master Edel gets back. Until then, I am not to be disturbed," Claudio said in a monotone voice, flinging the squirrel on Rosemarie's shoulder to Heidi and pulling Rosemarie into the bedroom. He finally released his grip on her hand once the door was completely shut.

She softly rubbed at her wrist, which hadn't reddened but felt a tad odd. Claudio, sitting on the bed, then finally—yet reluctantly—spoke.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No, you didn't. That aside, um, I am sorry for causing that disturbance in the dining hall." She hung her head, crestfallen, as she stood in front of Claudio. After a short pause, Claudio asked her to raise her head.

It wasn't even spoken as an order, but it still pricked at her heart. He was showing consideration for her and her faint-hearted ways. Slowly, she lifted her head, and she saw Claudio's sullen expression.

"Why are you apologizing?"

“Huh? Oh, well, um... I headbutted you and ran off on my own crying. I also disappeared without informing you as to where I would be going, which was a major inconvenience to you, Prince Claudio.” She couldn’t possibly apologize enough to make up for the latter.

Claudio gave a deep sigh and thrust his hand into his bangs.

“It wasn’t an inconvenience. I was just worried. My theory is that many of these people are under a spell, the Princess of Kavan included. You made all of that commotion, and only a few people actually paid us any mind. Master Edel is out right now, checking the other attendants who haven’t left their rooms.”

That meant what she predicted was right all along. Rosemarie clenched her fists.

“In that case, I should still apologize. Princess Suzette was under the influence of a spell, which meant even if she did try to advance on you, I—”

Rosemarie suddenly cut herself off, realizing that the rest of her thought would have made Claudio feel awkward.

“You what?” Claudio stared sharply at her. She shook her head and backed up a few steps.

“I headbutted you, ran off crying, and hid myself.”

“I heard you the first time. Is that what you really wanted to say there?” Despite Claudio pressing the issue, Rosemarie remained firm in keeping her mouth shut.

Claudio dropped his eyes a bit, apparently thinking something over. Then, suddenly, he looked at Rosemarie with a grin.

“—Okay. Let’s just drop it. I’m a little tired, so let me have your hand.” Claudio’s attitude mellowed far too abruptly to not take notice, but Rosemarie complied and put her hand atop his outstretched one. He then squeezed it and yanked her over, flipping her vision upside-down. And before she knew it, Claudio was looking at her while she looked up at him. Behind him was the white ceiling, and behind her head was the soft bedding. Both of her wrists sank into the bedding as he pinned them down.

“Did you think I would just say something sensible like ‘Okay’ and let it be? If you’re not going to say it, I’ll go ahead and say it.”

Her eyes opened wide to Claudio’s indifferent smile. She felt a lump form in her throat, fearful of Claudio preparing to infer aloud what she was thinking; her complexion went practically white.

“—Don’t say it.”

“I was jealous.”

The words that so effortlessly came out of his mouth were about *half* what she expected.

As she gazed up at Claudio absentmindedly, he awkwardly grinned at her and unhandled her. He then sat down on the bed next to

Rosemarie as she lay on her back.

“Even though I made you cry earlier, by the time you came back with Bishop Lancel, you were acting like your regular self. That is what had me jealous.” Claudio kept his eyes on Rosemarie without wavering. Now she understood: the reason he’d seemed to be in such a bad mood ever since they exited the byway wasn’t based in anger. However, as soon as she understood, she felt a prickling in the back of her nose and hurried to cover her face.

“Rosemarie? Are you crying? I would never try to force you to say something you don’t wish to say. I just wanted to startle you a little.”

That wasn’t true. She was sure that everything up until he’d said that was serious, but he probably pitied Rosemarie after seeing her complexion fade. Claudio was being so kind and rushing to find his words—it was killing her.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to tell Claudio how she really felt—she just didn’t want to make him feel awkward. The fear of hurting herself had been keeping her from telling him aloud.

“I... was jealous, as well. Jealous of Princess Suzette. I was so overcome with disgust at seeing her get so close up to you, Prince Claudio.” The second she’d laid eyes on that scene, her body moved on its own. Fears of inconveniencing him or worrying about public prestige—all of that completely dropped out of her head then.

Rosemarie had been covering her face with both hands, but that was when she realized that Claudio wasn’t reacting at all. This probably proved that her jealousy really had been an inconvenient factor after all. She was terrified to peek out from behind her hands. Eventually she did, slowly looking over in Claudio’s general direction to find him covering his forehead with both hands. His cheeks underneath were faintly red.

“Prince Claudio? Is there something the matter?”

“No, it’s just that—I never expected goading you would actually bring you to say that, so I’m a tad shaken up.”



A “tad” was putting it likely; he seemed *quite* shaken up. And he even admitted he’d been trying to goad her. Normally, this would be something to get angry over, but it came across as somewhat cute and made Rosemarie chuckle slightly.

“Don’t laugh. If you keep that up, you’re going to go on taking what I said in the *good* way.”

“Huh? Is there another way that I could take it? Please, tell me.” She sat up in a panic, but Claudio just gave her a mischievous smile.

“Tell you? Not a chance. Serves you right for laughing.”

Just when Rosemarie was about to press him further, a distant-sounding knock could be heard at the door.

“Oh, your Highness? You’re not assaulting Her Royal Wifeness, I take it? I... *hope*? Uh, anyway, Master Edel is back.”

“Who’s assaulting who?!” Fritz’s call made Claudio’s face tense up for a good second. He then stood up soon after.

“I swear... he was waiting for the right opportunity to come up to the door, the louse.” Claudio mumbled his discontent under his breath. Then, extending his hand to his wife, he added, “Come on, let’s go.”

Once she saw his hand, the sense of shame Rosemarie had almost forgotten came rushing back. She rose to her feet, straight as a board.

“I’ll be fine. I can stand on my own.”

Rosemarie stood up and tried to put her hand on the doorknob ahead of Claudio, but Claudio swooped in and grasped her hand from above. Her shoulders gave a huge jump. Slowly, she looked up at Claudio with doe eyes, only to find him wearing a dauntless smile.

“Don’t run away; I told you I was jealous.”

After hearing that whispered into her ear, Rosemarie shoved Claudio away with some force and dashed into the lounge where everyone else was waiting.

“Didn’t look at every guest room, but plenty of people feeling sluggish. But ones who are wide awake are one of two things. Sane or slightly off,” Edeltraud said, their usual droning voice mixed with a hint of perplexment as they reported on the status of the guests.

Rosemarie and the rest of the royal entourage listened to the report as they sat in the lounge in complete silence. After a while of this, Claudio, his arms folded and his expression stern, was the first to speak.

“You brought them regular water that you said was holy water, right? And ‘wide awake and sane’ people didn’t accept it, did they?”

“Yeah. All thought twice about drinking holy water. Guessing

they're attuned to danger or possess bit of mana." Apparently, mana that didn't belong to yourself was not something that felt enjoyable at all.

(I wasn't aware of that, but maybe Prince Claudio's mana did? Surely it wasn't of my own.)

Rosemarie looked at her palm in doubt as she sat in the space Claudio left for her on the couch beside him. Claudio let out a small sigh.

"What about the people other than the attendees of the ceremony—like the clergy and the servants? They seemed to be working away in the dining hall as if nothing was wrong." Fritz, who sat on the back of the single-seat sofa where Edeltraud was seated, raised his hand aloofly.

"My acquaintance said that he didn't have a drop. Said it was blasphemous to drink holy water. On the flip side, he also mentioned that there are people who drink it because they want to cleanse their body. It seems that those types have their faith deepened to an abnormal degree. And that's the sorta impression I got at the morning worship, too."

"Um, well, Adelina said that she hasn't had a clear mind and felt sluggish ever since she came here a year ago. I think the servants here are forcing themselves to work at an unreasonable capacity." Rosemarie followed up Fritz's assessment with some knowledge of her own, and remembered Ilse's words at the same time.

"Also, as a side note, Bishop Lancel told me that 'these lands are cursed'..."

"Your Highness, with all due respect, I was listening as well. And I quote, 'A falling-out with Prince Claudio right now is dangerous. These lands are cursed.'"

Having sharp ears was one thing, but that took the cake. Alto recited the entire remark verbatim, which made Rosemarie a little resentful—but also fearful of Claudio's reaction. She sheepishly looked over to him. He didn't so much as look at her, a scornful smile set upon his face.

"Oh? Not even conjugal relations are off-limits to the meddling ways of clergymen nowadays, I see. So be it. Anyway, what did he mean by 'cursed?'" She was certain that Claudio was disinterested, seeing as how he'd said he was jealous of Ilse, but she was relieved that he skimmed past that matter—which was when she realized.

"So, um, does this mean that Bishop Lancel hasn't drunk of the holy water? He seemed quite sane to me..."

"If Adelina asked him to take you to the belfry, then he must be in his right mind. I didn't find him particularly off when I talked to him, either. Then again, honestly speaking, he doesn't really let his

emotions show and seems somewhat suspicious.”

He was right. His mood didn’t fluctuate too radically, but since Rosemarie’s eyes would catch his bird head, he wasn’t completely emotionless.

“Hey, who’s Lancel?” Edeltraud jumped into the conversation. Rosemarie tilted her head, confused. The Archmagus tilted their head in similar fashion—confused.

“He is the bishop attending to us. Mage Edel, have you *not* met him?” Thinking back, she remembered Edeltraud hadn’t yet reconvened with them when Ilse first showed them around.

“Don’t think so. What’s he look like?”

“Hmm, well, he has a very calm yet fragile demeanor, and he has a sharp glare... Oh, he has white hair that is tied back into a neat braid.”

“—Frail man, neat braid, white hair. Hmm... yeah. Haven’t seen him.” Edeltraud’s sleepy-looking eyes squinted slowly. She thought she saw them raise an eyebrow ever so slightly, but it was probably her imagination.

While Edeltraud yawned in lost interest, Claudio mulled over the situation before pulling out the sack containing the Sacred Relic from his breast pocket and letting it roll out onto the table.

“The curse that Bishop Lancel mentioned wouldn’t happen to be a curse from the Hippocampus, would it?” The red and gold Sacred Relic looked to be even redder than when Rosemarie saw it yesterday, and she scooted closer to the edge of the couch in fear. The squirrel, once again riding on her shoulder, snuggled up to her cheek to comfort her.

“The... Hippocampus?”

“Yes. It was part of my hypothesis earlier that the Sacred Relic belonged to the Hippocampus and humans stole it, dipping it in the holy water and leaving traces of mana that exert magical control over those who drink it. Not only magic... but a *curse*. It wouldn’t surprise me if that was what Bishop Lancel was trying to tell you.”

What was once a hypothesis was gradually shaping into reality. With dread forming over the truth, Rosemarie’s eyes bulged and she fiddled with the base of her neck.

“That would mean, in order to break the spell on everyone, all we need to do is search for the Hippocampus and return the Sacred Relic?”

“Thinking in simple terms, yes. However, if Bishop Lancel knows that, it must mean that the Holy Land’s upper crust is aware of that as well. Perhaps... they have a reason why they *can’t* return the Sacred Relic...” Claudio said, trailing off at the end of his sentence. He then looked up at Fritz as though he’d come to a realization.

“Fritz, have you gathered the papers I asked for yesterday?”

“Huh? You mean that stuff about wanting a check on the credibility of the chatter heard at yesterday’s little tea party? If you’re fine with some jotted notes, I’ve got them here.”

Claudio took the handful of notes Fritz pulled out of his breast pocket and began to read them, his expression serious. Rosemarie looked to Fritz so as not to disturb Claudio.

“Father Fritz, by ‘tea party,’ do you mean Princess Suzette’s tea party yesterday?”

“That’s the one. A regular gathering of shrewd folks in a proverbial tug of war to learn the climate of each other’s nations. You know, the sort of thing His Highness does sometimes back in Baltzar, while complaining under his breath all the while. But since there was quite a lot of intel flying around, we couldn’t just neglect it.” Even though they didn’t know if Suzette’s tea party would be important at all, there was the chance they could pick up some useful knowledge.

—Now I see. I’ve figured out the reason they can’t return the relic.” Claudio chucked the stack of notes on the table. Rosemarie tried peeking at them, but there were so many digits, years, and place names written down that she couldn’t make heads or tails of any of it.

“What kind of reason?”

“The salt mines in the Holy Land are running dry. In relation to that, the number of worshipers has increased. And they have been gradually on the rise ever since the year they started the Sacred Relic Worship. As well as what the Holy Land townspeople pay to the higher-ups. In other words...”

“It’s about... money?”

“It is. If you take away this so-called ‘white gold’ or ‘miracle salt’ that they make such expensive transactions with, then the Holy Land wouldn’t be able to sustain itself. Right now, it seems that they’re getting a lot of donations from the Sacred Relic Worship and baptism with holy water. That would explain why they can’t afford to return the Sacred Relic.” Claudio tensed his brows, and Rosemarie pursed her lips. She knew that faith alone wasn’t enough to sustain a nation, but she couldn’t stand for them falsifying a Sacred Relic just to line their own pockets.

An oppressive silence befell the room, which was suddenly broken by the sound of clapping.

“Okie-dokie, everyone, what do you say to putting this talk of gloom and doom off for a second for a tiny break? I think the bad ideas get badder and the good ideas don’t even come to mind on an empty stomach.”

Heidi spoke in a chipper tone as she went over to the corner of the room to pick up a tray of refreshments. Once Rosemarie saw that, her

stomach started to growl—noticeably so. She held her stomach and slowly looked over to Claudio, who was looking away with a hand over his mouth. His shoulders were jumping up and down like he was trying to contain a laugh. Rosemarie's face flushed in an instant.

"Uh, well, you can't blame her. She skipped lunch, after all." Fritz attempted to advocate for her with an awkward smile.

Meanwhile, Edeltraud simply rebuked Claudio. "Laughing's rude."

But Rosemarie found herself so embarrassed that she couldn't raise her head to either of them.

"No, I'm sorry. You reacted as soon as you saw the food, so I couldn't help myself..."

"P-Please stop making me out to be a glutton," she argued back to Claudio. He gently tapped her on the head as if to say, "Yeah, okay. I've got the picture." As he did, something white fell from his cuff.

"...?" Rosemarie followed whatever it was on its way down, dumbfounded at the clump of white hair that had dropped on the seat. There was far too much here for it be from the squirrel on her shoulder. She found herself looking between Claudio and the clump once, twice, and even a third time.

"Why are you acting so strange all of a sudden?"

"Um... Prince Claudio? Do you happen to have a season where you shed?"

"Do I have a *what*?" Rosemarie's non sequitur made Claudio and everyone else's eyes spring open, but she picked up the white animal hair regardless for display.

"This is your hair... right?"

Seeing that clump brought up in front of him caused Claudio to tense up and touch his own head.

"If you don't shed, then it might be stress-related—"

"Wait a second. I'm *not* going bald. I *assure* you, I'm *not* going bald. Don't look at me with those sympathetic eyes, Alto! And *you*, Fritz! Enough of that obvious chortling!"

While Rosemarie looked on tensely as Claudio snapped at his two aides with a face red with rage, Edeltraud came over and leaned forward. She held out the tuft of animal hair out so that they could have an unobstructed look.

Edeltraud observed it closely for a bit and eventually whispered, "This is goat hair."

The unexpected answer caused Rosemarie to blink in confusion. Upon a much, much closer look, the white tuft of animal hair had a slight tinge of yellow to it. The mane that she had seen up until a few days ago had a silver-white sheen in the light.

(Prince Claudio's head doesn't look like a beast to me now, so there would be no way that I'd see him shedding, anyway. But goat

hair must mean that...)

That was when it dawned upon her. “Could it be... the goat from this morning?”

A chill ran down the length of her spine. She hadn’t seen the actual carcass, but since she heard about the condition they found it in, it formed a gruesome mental image.

“A goat, you say? But I didn’t lay a finger on it.” Temporarily suppressing his shock, Claudio cast a suspicious frown on the tuft of goat hair, his expression slightly weary.

“The resemblance to that goat’s pelt is uncanny, I admit. But the question is: when? When did it stick to me? It couldn’t very well stick to me if I never held it in my arms.”

“Remember interacting with anyone that had goat’s hair on them? Or no?” Edeltraud questioned as they held out a hand to Rosemarie. She took the hint and passed the tuft over, and the Archmagus bottled it up inside a tiny glass orb.

“Alto, you touched it in order to move it to the corner of the passageway... Am I right?”

“Sir, I indeed touched it, but I brushed my clothes afterward. I had planned to accompany you to the dining hall, so I checked myself on the off chance that I might need to tidy myself up.” Since Alto was always diligent and serious, he wouldn’t let a single speck of dust on his body go unchecked.

“In that case, when and where could it have happened...? Oh...”

“The only time I can think of is... Hm?”

Both Rosemarie and Claudio looked into each other’s now wide-open eyes. Claudio’s face was sullen.

“The Princess of Kavan.”

“Do you... think so?” Rosemarie tilted her head slightly, brows slanted. The sight of the princess snuggling up and clinging to Claudio popped back into her mind, and she hastily shook her head.

“Um, but would it even be possible for a girl such as Princess Suzette to carry a goat—even if it is all dried up—on her own? I can only imagine either a sorcerer or a sacred beast making that possible...”

“The Hippocampus could make it possible. As rotten as they are, they’re still a sacred beast. Their mana is extraordinary. I am assuming they controlled the Princess of Kavan and used her to plant all of those animal carcasses. To what ends I still have no idea, however...” He put his hand on his chin and curved his lips pensively. Rosemarie watched him, slowly realizing a terrifying fact that made her clutch at the base of her neck.

“—Does that mean that I am being targeted by both the Hippocampus and Princess Suzette?”

“It would seem so, yes,” affirmed Claudio, as if not knowing how to break the news. Rosemarie clutched to the Kaola dangling from her neck in the face of the fear welling from inside her.

As if to break the silence that once again descended on the room, Heidi came back to her senses and finished pouring the halfway-filled cup of tea; she then served it to Rosemarie.

“Here you are, princess. This will warm you up.”

“...Thank you, Heidi,” Rosemarie replied as she picked up the warm cup of tea, the heat helping to relieve her dread-frozen fingers and tense mess of a heart. While she thanked Heidi for her consideration, Claudio picked up the Sacred Relic on the table.

“Master Edel, tell me. Do you think that returning this to the Hippocampus will settle matters?”

“Don’t know. Now that spell has spread so far over the church, might be difficult matter.” Edeltraud grimaced slightly, their pair of sleepy-looking eyes pointed down in lament.

“Even so, if there’s any possibility of us breaking the spell on the Princess of Kavan first, we should try. Master Edel, can I borrow you for a minute?” Claudio rose to his feet and went to exit the room with Edeltraud accompanying him. After a little thought, Rosemarie put down her teacup and chased after them.

“Prince Claudio, I will accompany you. I might be able to break the spell like I did with Adelina,” she appealed to Claudio, containing the slight shivering in her fingers.

“What sense would it make to bring the very person being targeted along with us? You just stay here and...” Claudio was about to shut her down, but seemed to have a change of heart.

“Actually... no. Okay. Come along.” He nodded in agreement.

Rosemarie, who thought it would take a little more back-and-forth, was deflated and looked up at him doubtfully. Claudio gave an awkward sigh.

“I was practically on the edge of my seat when you went to the dining hall by yourself this morning. Now I know what it feels like to be the one left waiting. It would be better to just bring you along than make you go through that.”

“Thank you so much!” Rosemarie thanked Claudio with a broad smile on her face, but Claudio was pensive and discontent, nonetheless.

“But if I had my way, I would *not* be bringing you with me. Okay? Just make sure you keep that in mind,” he said as both a reminder and a warning, prompting Rosemarie to tense up and quickly nod her head over and over.

Suzette's room wasn't on the fourth floor where Rosemarie and the others were staying, but on the fifth floor, directly below. Leaving both Alto and Heidi back at the room, they let Fritz lead them there, as he'd served in the cathedral in the past. As they headed there, Rosemarie kept her ears tuned to the sounds around her.

Was that howling noise she heard the sound of the wind? It clearly wasn't the same sound she heard at the saint's chapel or in her dream. She could say with some degree of certainty that it was actually the sound of the wind, and with it, the faint sound of the cascading waves.

"You can hear the sounds of the waves here," Rosemarie said to Claudio, barely above a whisper.

"That you can. Something not possible where our room is, on the fourth floor... It might get clearer to the ears the lower you go down," he replied to her, keeping his voice concealed as well.

It was noon and it was far too early for the sun to be setting, yet the pathways were devoid of any signs of life. This might have been an unremarkable sight considering the floor contained primarily guest rooms, but the silence was so deafening that it was hard to believe there even *were* any guests in the rooms they passed by.

"Le'sse here. That one. I think." At the head of the party, Fritz suddenly pointed about two doors up from them. The white stucco door didn't look any different from the other guest room doors they had seen before, but there was a slight dissonance surrounding it.

"I assume that door... isn't properly locked, is it?"

"Yes, I'd assume as well." Claudio squinted warily. Under normal circumstances, no one would leave their door unlocked—then again, circumstances were hardly normal right now.

"Rosemarie, stay here with Fritz," ordered Claudio as Rosemarie obediently stopped in her tracks. She knew something here was off and she wanted to avoid tying anyone down.

Claudio approached the door with Edeltraud. As he opened the door, Claudio's eyes shot down and opened wide as a result.

"... A hand?" His whisper reached Rosemarie's ears, taking her aback. In the next instant, Claudio went from carefully opening the door to swinging it open.

"...!!"

Claudio looked on in temporary shock, but shook it off and rushed into the room. Edeltraud slid into the room on silent feet, almost simultaneously.

"Hey, pull yourself together!"

Hearing the concerned call, Rosemarie found herself stepping forward, but Fritz shielded her with his body, cutting off her path.

"Don't. Wait a little longer," Fritz said from over her shoulder, his

tone carrying a degree of seriousness far different from his usual aloof nature. Unable to stop her heart from beating at a mile a minute, she gripped the Kaola pendant, completely on edge.

"It's safe to come in now, you two," Claudio called out to them before too long. Rosemarie walked up to the door with Fritz, and found Claudio holding up a girl in his arms. The black-haired girl in servant's garb was obviously not Suzette.

"This girl..."

"She's the Princess of Kavan's maid." Rosemarie timidly came up to the maid and knelt next to her. The pale-faced, black-haired maid was out cold.

"Claudio, Kavan Princess nowhere to be found. As expected," said Edeltraud, making her look in that direction. The Archmagus had taken a look inside the wide-open bedroom and tilted their head, clearly perplexed.

"Where would she even go, leaving the maid that's always by her side?"

While looking at the puzzled Claudio out of the corner of her eye, Rosemarie softly touched the forehead of the maid in his arms. In the next instant, just as when she'd hugged Adelina, she felt something peel away.

"...!!"

The mysterious happening occurred in an all too familiar manner, which made her jump and remove her hand. Almost as though acting in tandem to the motion, the maid opened her eyes.

"...? You're...!" the maid trailed off in a slightly raspy voice, her face immediately filling with fear, causing her to break away from Claudio. Her head morphed into a raccoon dog's before Rosemarie's eyes.

"You collapsed on the floor. Do you know what happened here?" Claudio's voice was bold, as if he were conducting an interrogation. The raccoon dog-headed maid's shoulders jolted.

Rosemarie jumped into the conversation in attempts to quell the maid's fears in any way she could. "What has happened to Princess Suzette?"

The raccoon dog-headed maid showed some slight hesitation upon seeing Rosemarie, but after a short pause, she started to speak.

"...Um, yes, well, ever since we arrived in the Holy Land, she has been acting quite strangely. I would find myself unable to move freely, and before I knew it, Princess Suzette would be nowhere to be seen... Next thing I knew, Princess Suzette's clothes would be damp and covered in some sort of stains and animal fur... And the smell of salt water would..."

The raccoon dog-headed maid cut herself off there and began to

quake all over. She shut her lips tight and didn't show signs of opening them, not intending to finish her statement. Rosemarie stroked the poor maid's back in a consoling manner as she turned to Claudio.

"Princess Suzette was being controlled by the Hippocampus all along, then?"

"All signs point to that, yes. Hey, could you answer us just one more... no, two more questions?" Claudio said to the maid in as gentle a tone as he could muster. "Did Princess Suzette drink of the holy water? And, if she did, were there any strange phenomena that occurred after?"

The maid kept her mouth shut for a bit, but she eventually gripped Rosemarie's arm that was holding her up and spoke.

"She indeed drank of the holy water. And after she did, she was so overwhelmed with curiosity that she started looking at locales all over the church, straying from both the bishop caretaker and myself before we even realized. When we finally found her, she just smiled and said she'd been watching the ocean... but that *couldn't* have been!"

The maid's hand clenched even tighter on Rosemarie's arm. Claudio almost went to pull her off, but Rosemarie shook her head and stopped him before he could. The maid was squeezing Rosemarie's arm so tightly she feared she'd lose circulation to it, but she gritted her teeth and bore it.

"We reunited with Princess Suzette on the *eighth* floor staircase. And she was climbing up from the *ninth* floor below," the maid stated, her raccoon dog head pressing up to Rosemarie; her eyes went wide and her body tensed up as a result.

(The sea? Underground? Oh, but, the tenth floor is...)

The cathedral that sat atop the modest hill used the height of the cliff to its advantage to burrow underground. Hence why Ilse explained to them, on the first day, that the tenth and deepest floor was connected to the ocean. There was one problem, though...

"The tenth floor's staircase is collapsed, meaning you can't go down..."

Once that realization set in, a cold shiver coursed through her. Suzette *couldn't* have seen the ocean here. It was on the other side of a collapsed staircase.

"—I... understand now. I'm sorry for making you recall something so dreadful. Fritz, borrow a different room and let this woman rest." Claudio gently pulled the maid's hand off Rosemarie's arm and handed her over to Fritz. The raccoon dog-headed maid suddenly lifted her lowered head. Her face was slowly starting to revert back to human form as she did.

"I beg of you, please save Princess Suzette. The mistress has

always disliked being portrayed as someone with a grizzled personality based solely on her looks. Which is why she looked forward to the chance to meet Prince Claudio, thinking that he would understand how tough it must be to be in such a situation. However, that was her only objective. She would never be so utterly disrespectful toward a man and his wife in the way she was, normally...”

Fritz began to lead the maid out of the room, consoling her as she broke down in tears. As soon as she was out of view, the kneeling Rosemarie put her hands to the floor. She was feeling dizzy, as if there was a release of tension somewhere inside her.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m... okay. Outside of longing for my bucket, that is.”

Claudio extended his hand with a wry smile. She took it, using it to get back on her feet.

“Maybe we should return to the room for the time being. We have no idea if the Princess of Kavan will be coming back here, so there’s not much of a point in staying. Master Edel, have you picked up on anything else?” Claudio called out to Edeltraud while they searched around the room as Rosemarie watched. That was when she noticed a blue evening dress hanging in the corner of the room.

(I’m sure that is... the dress that Princess Suzette was in the first time we met.)

For some reason, it seemed to be hanging in a very deliberate manner, and it made Rosemarie turn her eyes away from it.

“Did you spot something?”

“No, not a thing. We were returning, yes?”

After exchanging a dialogue with Claudio, who quickly noticed her reaction, she led the way out of the room. Claudio quickly followed behind her, albeit perplexed. Edeltraud passed by the side and started walking in front of Rosemarie.

That blue dress from a second ago popped into her mind.

(“He would understand how tough it must be to be in such a situation”...)

“‘He would understand how tough it must be to be in such a situation,’ eh? Well, I can’t say I don’t understand that...”

She jumped, almost mistaking that for her own voice for a second, but once she identified it as Claudio’s words and not her own, she patted her chest down in relief. However, she found her mood dampened soon after.

“...Yes. You’re right.” Claudio *would* know best about how hard it was to be judged based on your appearances.

Although it was being amplified by way of magic, if she had so much adoration that she resented Rosemarie, then she might have

filled the role as Baltzar's crown princess instead if Rosemarie hadn't stolen Claudio's mana all those years ago.

(I have to give the title of crown princess to someone more befitting of the role and return to Volland once I return his mana... That was what I thought I needed to do, but... I just...)

She had no desire to go back to her country, nor to give her position to someone else—even if she would be hated because of it. She was slightly afraid; this line of thinking wasn't like her at all.

She cast her eyes down, tightening her lips.

Claudio said that he would never be able to smile again if she were no longer around. He even said that he was jealous of Ilse. The former notwithstanding, the latter was said without an ounce of hesitation, making it hard to make out whether he said it out of camaraderie or if he had romantic feelings for her.

"Hey, you're not getting any funny ideas, are you?"

"Am I... huh...?"

Claudio tapped Rosemarie on the shoulder from behind as she continued to fret, causing her to stand up straight in surprise.

"Ideas like: If you hadn't stolen my mana, the Princess of Kavan would have likely filled the role as crown princess? Or maybe: If I return his mana, then I could give the princess the position and return to Volland?"

The fingers that were sunk into Rosemarie's shoulder made her stiffen her expression. How did he find that out in the first place? She was afraid to turn around.

"—T-That wasn't on my mind."

"Rosemarie?"

"...I'm sorry. It was." After a coaxing call of her name, Rosemarie buckled under the pressure and confessed. Claudio sighed deeply.

"Did you forget that I said I had no plans on sending you back to Volland? Why do you want to go back so bad even though you're supposedly so jealous? I swear... what a sad state of affairs if I have to be allotted a second wife by the woman I love."

"...Huh?" The whispered remark made Rosemarie doubt her own ears as she cowered.

"What was that... you just said?"

—The woman he loved?

That unbelievable thought running through her mind, Rosemarie awkwardly turned around to face Claudio. He sighed with a sullen expression.

"Did you not hear me the first time? I said, and I quote, 'I have no plans of sending you back to...'"

"No, not that. What you said after that. After 'allotted a second wife by'...?"

“After that? Allotted a second wife... by... Grk...?!”

Claudio stopped in his tracks, flushed from cheek to ear. He removed the hand on Rosemarie’s shoulder, pressed the back of one hand to his mouth, and let his eyes wander around in distress. He was getting so red in the face, in fact, that her own cheeks started to get warm, as if his heat carried over.

“...Did I say what I think I said?”

“...You did.” Rosemarie nodded firmly. Claudio held his forehead as if he wanted to follow up with a none-too-pleasant obscenity. He proceeded to scratch and clutch at his head, peeking at Rosemarie. His gaze slowly heated up.

“—Yes, you’ve found me out. I’m in love with you. You’re the one person who always looks at me with earnestness no matter what I may look like. *That* is why I don’t want to send you back.”

Once she heard those words, despite this being a joyous occasion, she felt her chest tighten up and her heart beat so fast that it hurt, and she turned her face away.

“I...” Rosemarie started, hanging her head so fast that the Kaola seed pendant dropped from her neck, most likely a result of the fastener not being clasped on right. It hit the floor with a *clink*, echoing oddly in her ears.

—*Boy, I’m in love with you. You’re quite the character.*

The amused words of a young boy popped into her mind. Behind closed eyes, she saw the face of a much younger, much happier-looking Claudio—his expression was filled with joy, innocent and willing to let his feelings be known aloud without restrictions.

When she blinked, that illusion started to sink to the back of her memories with only tiny traces of the voice still remaining.

“I... feel as though you’ve told me that you love me back when we were kids.” The sporadic memories of when they first met seven years ago were so shaky that she had no confidence in them. Her father, King Volland, had told her that she never met Claudio before. So, what were the meaning of these memories she had?

She stared at Claudio with uncertainty, and he looked back at her, dumbfounded.

“I... did...? I don’t recall us ever being intimate enough for me to bring that up in conversation...” Claudio grimaced and rubbed his forehead, possibly trying to remember.

Silence befell them.

Claudio looked like a lost child and, if Rosemarie could see her own face, she guessed she’d have a similar expression. Her heart was in a frenzy and she couldn’t calm down.

Claudio suddenly stooped over and picked up the Kaola pendant on the floor. He closed his eyes as if to recompose his feelings and

opened them soon after. His face no longer looked lost.

"I may *have* said it, and I may *not* have said it. However, the fact that I said it right here and now remains true. You don't need to reply just yet. Right now, I'm fine so long as you know how it is I feel about you. Just keep in mind that is the level of involvement I plan on keeping with you," Claudio said in a somewhat embarrassed manner, putting the Kaola pendant back on Rosemarie.

"...Okay, I understand." She felt the fire being relit under her face after it had just finished cooling down as she nodded in affirmation, bashful all the while.

"Why in *blazes* did you come back to the room halfway through, Mage Edeltraud?!" Steam was practically pouring out of Heidi's black cat ears in anger while Rosemarie sat on the couch, her head lowered and her face flushed. The squirrel climbed on her shoulder as soon as she got back to the room and nuzzled itself against her cheek in concern.

However, despite being the one being chewed out, Edeltraud attempted to stifle a yawn indifferently as they sat at an angle on the shorter sofa.

Rosemarie had been so engrossed in her conversation with Claudio on their way back from Suzette's room, she hadn't even noticed the mage leaving ahead of them. If she had her bucket, it would be on her head so fast.

Claudio came back to the room for a stint, but he left with Alto, noting that he was going to go check on Suzette's maid that was under Fritz's care.

"H-Heidi, don't be so harsh... Claudio and I are as much to blame..."

"That's also right, princess! If you're going to talk to Prince Claudio, then I would implore you to do it *after* coming back to the room. How am I supposed to hear your tender moments unless... Oh, I mean, um, ignore that." Heidi accidentally let the truth slip out, which made Rosemarie blush and cover her face. There were a lot of instances of Heidi being around when her conversations with Claudio took a more passionate turn, but she never would have guessed that the maid actually looked forward to hearing them.

While she was curious as to how much of their conversation Edeltraud heard and told to Heidi, at the same time, the past memories that had come bubbling to the surface made her even more curious.

Did she really have some sort of prior acquaintance with Claudio?

"Um, Mage Edel?" As soon as she started speaking, there was a

knock at the door.

Tension coursed through the room. Rosemarie glanced at Edeltraud and the sorcerer silently nodded. Heidi stood in front of the door and answered politely.

“Yes? Who is it?”

The unknown visitor didn’t respond. Slowly and cautiously, Heidi opened the door.

“Oh, there’s no one here... Hm?...?! Adelina?!” Heidi screamed the braided young girl’s name in a panic, alarming Rosemarie.

From the other side of the door, she saw Heidi helping Adelina, her shoulders bobbing fiercely up and down, into the room. Her right hand hung limply at her side, fresh blood trickling from the tip of her finger.

“What happened to you?!”

“—Close... the door. Hurry!” Adelina screamed harshly. Edeltraud responded unusually quickly, rushing to close and lock the door.

Shocked to her core, Rosemarie took to her knees by Adelina’s side as she crumpled to the floor with Heidi. That was when she noticed the scratches on various parts of the girl’s body. The biggest gash seemed to be around her shoulder, which was drenched in fresh blood.

“What happened?”

“Where’s your husband? Your husband is a sorcerer, right? You can make a quick escape to the surface even from here, right? If you can, then run. Quickly. Now! You’re going to get killed!” As a mix of cold sweat and blood ran from Adelina’s forehead, her face morphed into weasel form, practically in sync with each droplet. She looked seriously afflicted, but the grip she had on Rosemarie’s arm was strong.

The word “killed” was too much of a giveaway. The face of the owner of the room they’d just explored, as well as that vibrant dress, immediately sprang to mind.

“Did Princess Suzette do this to you?”

“She did. It seems she saw me with you in the dining hall. She ordered me to tell her where your room was, but she was acting strange. I led her somewhere else and tried to make an escape, but...” Adelina winced, probably in pain. Edeltraud, who stood next to her, offered her a hand. Once they did, the blood seeping out onto her clothes finally stopped.

“Prince Claudio isn’t here right now. He should be coming back soon, though...”

“For the love of... your husband has the worst timing!”

“Calm down, Adelina. Your wounds will grow worse.”

“You need to take this more seriously!”

She was sure that Adelina would glare a hole into her for saying it, but she was *extremely* shaken up, despite appearances. Her heart was beating at a mile a minute despite not doing anything physical at all, and her legs were shaking so badly that she was unsure if she could even stand up or not.

Edeltraud patted her lightly on her trembling shoulders, then placed their hand on Adelina's forehead.

"Keep from getting excited. Don't worry. You have me here."

Guided by the mage's monotone yet calm tone, Adelina closed her eyes. Her entire body untensed and she fell asleep as if falling unconscious. Rosemarie let out a little sigh.

"Do you think that Prince Claudio is safe?"

"Don't worry about him. You're the one in danger."

Watching Edeltraud lend Heidi a hand in laying Adelina on the couch, Rosemarie finally got to her feet, managing to stand up, albeit slightly shaky on her feet.

"We should probably get Adelina out of those bloody clothes. I'll get her something she can change into," Rosemarie said before heading off into the bedroom.

(If Princess Suzette was asking Adelina for the location of my room, does that mean she wasn't conscious when the Hippocampus was controlling her and she left that goat carcass at our doorstep...?)

Rosemarie opened the storage trunk, pulled out a blouse and skirt, and headed back toward the lounge, but a cold shiver ran down her spine—accompanied by the drifting scent of salt water.

The squirrel upon her shoulder squeaked in warning. But even after a scan of the area, there was no one to be found.

(Was that just my imagination...?)

Perplexed, she attempted to exit the bedroom, but tripped over something before she could.

"Ow... Hm...?!"

She thought she had tripped on something, but when she looked at her ankle, she saw a bundle of yellow-white hair wrapped around it. Rosemarie tracked where it was coming from—which apparently was the abyss under the bed.

"What... is this...?" It was dragging her across the floor, attempting to pull her under the bed.

"Mage Edel! ...!!" she shouted at the closed door as she tried to claw away at the bundle of hair wrapped around her. The squirrel ran down her shoulder and nibbled at it. For a second, the white mass of hair sank back as if it were afraid, but it wasted no time coming back to tangle her up in it again.

"Volland Princess!" Edeltraud cried, rushing into the room just as Rosemarie was getting dragged under the bed.

“Rosemarie!”

She thought she could hear Claudio’s voice as she began to fall down a deep hole—something that couldn’t possibly be under a bed normally. Terrified, Rosemarie squeezed her eyes shut.



“Rosemarie!”

Just as Claudio saw her slender fingers disappear from view, Edeltraud cast a magic wind, upturning the bed.

However, there was no hole there; just the cold, hard floor.

“What... is going on here?” Clicking his tongue in frustration, he kicked the space where the bed once stood.

Claudio had been on his way to check on Suzette’s maid. But Fritz ran into him on the way there, informing him that the maid had been left in the care of a clergyman in his right mind, so he turned back to the room... just in time to be flabbergasted at what in the world had just transpired.

His eyes stopped on something in the disheveled comforter and sheets, and he stared in shock.

“What in the...?”

“... This is the goat hair I bottled up earlier?” Edeltraud picked up the goat hair that fell from Claudio’s cuff. They had indeed bottled it up in a glass orb. It should have been resting on the table in the lounge afterward, so what was it doing in here among the sheets?

“Princess...? Are you all right?!” Heidi asked timidly. She peeked into the bedroom, looking at the upturned bed and storage trunk and being at a loss for words. She then scanned her eyes all over the room to spot Rosemarie. The glass orb in Edeltraud’s hands caught her attention.

Heidi relaxed her tense expression for a moment upon finding the glass orb. “Oh, I’m sorry. That fell on the ground as I was putting away the dishes after everyone else left the room. I didn’t know where it went off to... Um, so, the princess. Where is...”

When she saw Claudio answering her call for Rosemarie with a grim face and a shake of the head, her once relaxed face went deathly pale. Fritz held the maid’s shoulders as she staggered, his expression tense.

Gnawing on their lip a little, Edeltraud stomped on the floor and instantly restored the destroyed bedroom back to its former glory.

“Same as when I sent Volland Princess to castle using yew branch as medium when she came to guard post. Someone or *something* used goat hair as medium and took Volland Princess away.”

“There shouldn’t be any mana in *goat hair*.”

Claudio grimaced. The yew tree had trace amounts of mana, which made it a likely candidate for a medium.

“It *shouldn’t*. It’s why I let guard down. Probably mana seeped in so minute, I didn’t recognize it.” Edeltraud, eyes narrowed, broke the

glass. Then, with a turn of their palm, the goat hair was incinerated in the blink of an eye. And once it was, the resulting smell that wafted past their nasal cavities wasn't the smell of smoke.

"Is that... salt water I smell? So... it was the Hippocampus!" Claudio exclaimed, still irritably waving away the billowing smoke. He then took huge strides out of the room, a serious-faced Alto followed behind him in silence. However, Fritz stood in his path.

"Your Highness, where are you going?! Her Royal Wifeness has been taken to God-knows-where and you're just going to take off?!"

"I have two possible ideas where. One place could be close to the collapsed tenth floor where the Princess of Kavan was found when she went missing. The other could be the saint's chapel where the Sacred Relic was enshrined and those two animal carcasses were dumped. However, if they're using goat hair as a magical medium, then the chapel seems much more likely."

With his heart beating like mad and a cold sweat pouring from his forehead, the last thing he wanted to do was let impatience cloud his better judgment. Edeltraud caught up with them from behind, got in front of them, and led the pack themselves.

"Fritz, if we don't make our return before dawn, then tell everything to Bishop Lancel. I'm sure he will be able to manage something."

They left the lounge, not even waiting for Fritz's reply. It was almost time for dinner, but the group didn't pass by anybody coming or going. The three pairs of footsteps traveled through the bizarrely silent and narrow church passageway.

"Claudio, did you see Adelina?" Edeltraud asked without turning around to face Claudio, who nodded and replied.

"Yes, I did. The Princess of Kavan did that, I assume?"

"She did. That's why the Princess of Kavan might be more dangerous than Hippocampus right now," warned Edeltraud; their indifferent tone was helping to quell Claudio's inner panic. He took a sharp inhale to regain his breath and pumped his feet against the floor, his destination being the chapel.

Thud. Rosemarie fell onto something hard, causing her to let out a small moan.

"Yowch..."

As she surveyed her surroundings while rubbing her back, something came rolling off from her lap.

"Momo!" Finding her fluffy flying squirrel friend, Rosemarie hurried to pick it up. The silver flower emblem on its forehead gleamed dimly in the dark, which helped her calm her tense heart

rather than make her suspect anything from it; it instilled her with a sense of relief knowing that she wasn't alone.

"Where are we...?"

A better look at her surroundings revealed that she was in Saint Kamil's chapel. She realized she was sitting on the altar in front of the lifelike statue of Kamil. Slowly, her face growing pale, she made her way off it.

"How did I get here, of all places...?"

Perhaps because only a few candles were ever lit outside of worship time, the chapel—normally filled with bright lights—was barely illuminated today. The salt chandeliers hanging from the ceiling were practically invisible in the darkness.

She remembered being dragged underneath the bed... so how did she end up upstairs, on the third floor? She looked down at her wrists slowly and shuddered when she saw the deep marks left by the bundle of fibers that had latched onto her wrist.

The girl couldn't make heads or tails of what happened to her, but her intuition told her that whole ordeal was magic-related. Which meant that it was the Hippocampus's handiwork.

"I have to get back..." She knew how to get back to the room from here, which was the only saving grace in this situation.

With her squirrel seated on its usual shoulder perch, she tried to zip to the exit of the chapel. But she stopped at the sound of footsteps—footsteps rushing toward her.

(Who is that...?)

She had no idea who it could have been, which meant it was highly possible it was Suzette, who already had Rosemarie in her sights.

As she tried to contain her beating heart, she looked around for a place to hide. A normal church would have pews lining the aisles, but since there wasn't a single one here for some odd reason, she literally had nowhere to hide.

Panicking, Rosemarie pinned herself as flat as she could against the door next to the exit of the chapel. If she could bolt out behind whoever came in, she might go unnoticed.

Slowly, the footsteps drew near. She gulped, the tension swiftly drying out her throat as she tried to contain her body from shaking out of control.

Someone entered the chapel. Rosemarie watched as they walked straight to the altar without even scanning the room. She stifled a yelp and immediately exited the chapel.

(A dirty-blond dog head... That was Princess Suzette!)

While she attempted to proceed down the passageway as silently as possible, the sounds from her shoes echoed. *Click!* rang the sound of

her heels against the floor—remarkably loud throughout the passageway.

She looked over her shoulder with a gasp to find the dirty-blond dog-headed princess turning to face her as well. Clutched in her hand was a thin knife.

Rosemarie shot out like a bat out of hell. The ornately decorated pathways weaved in and out, sending her sense of direction off-kilter. (Where is the staircase downstairs again?)

One false step could funnel her out into who-knows-where. And even more so since she was in a frenzy.

The squirrel jumped to the top of her head and squeaked away diligently. The footsteps that came after her showed no signs of stopping—in fact, they were growing closer. Rosemarie bit her lip before it had a chance to tremble in fear.

(Maybe I should break the spell instead of just running away?)

That was the epitome of a sink-or-swim gamble. Neither Adelina nor Suzette's maid came at her with a weapon when she interacted with them. Suzette, on the other hand, was approaching her from behind with a knife. While she had no idea whether Suzette was proficient with a blade or not, she most likely had an advantage given that she was under the control of a spell.

Just as Rosemarie was finding herself lost, the squirrel suddenly flew off her shoulder. Or, so she thought. For whatever reason, it clung to a wall decorated in bellflowers on the corner a small distance away.

“Momo, why did you fly there...?” She retrieved the squirrel, almost careening into it. Her momentum caused the wall to move slightly inward, and that was when she gasped at the sudden recollection.

(Oh...! The byway!)

When Ilse brought her and the others to the belfry, they used the servant-exclusive byways instead of the normal pathways. This was probably a hidden door to one of them.

The footsteps were drawing near her.

This was no time to be indecisive. Rosemarie pushed the door with all her might and rushed inside. Too panicked to close it behind her, she started to run down the byway, which was even darker and more dimly lit than the main paths.

It was so dark in the byway, in fact, that the flower emblem on the forehead of the squirrel tucked in her arms seemed to have become even brighter.

(Where's the exit?)

She couldn't sense anyone following her, but she couldn't afford to wander this dark corridor aimlessly forever, either.

“Momo, do you see the exit?” Rosemarie asked the squirrel, who had moved to her shoulder. She placed a hand over her chest—and suddenly noticed that her Kaola pendant wasn’t there. She gasped.

(Did I drop it somewhere?!)

She felt terrible. Claudio had put so much thought into that pendant. She considered going back to search for it, but stopped herself from turning around when she realized how bad of an idea that was. Claudio would have chewed her out if her going back meant that she would get caught—or something even worse. Any error in judgment could keep her from seeing Claudio ever again.

“Oh, Prince Claudio...!” Until just moments ago, he was so close to her that she could still touch him. Yet she still couldn’t help the longing she had in her heart. Going on without seeing him ever again was something she simply would not stand for.

Gritting her teeth, she pressed forward. There was no sign of Suzette’s presence. However, that wasn’t the only thing; she hadn’t seen anybody along the way at all, which instilled in her an ever-growing sense of panic.

The fear that she might be all alone in this underground cathedral welled up from inside—a fear that developed into thoughts that this game of cat-and-mouse would never end, as well.

—But that was when lights brighter than any she had seen so far came into sight in front of her. What she saw below it made her eyes widen.

(Is that... the staircase?)

This winding, ascending spiral staircase was smaller than the one at the entrance when she first descended into the cathedral, but she remembered, nonetheless. This was the same staircase that led to the belfry with the sweeping view of the ocean.

The ever-vigilant squirrel squeaked once more. Footsteps could be heard somewhere in the distance.

No time to be indecisive now. She was better off lying in wait for Suzette somewhere with more space than just running around aimlessly and exhausting her strength.

Upon climbing the spiral staircase, the chilly winds engulfed her body. The beach winds were strong, and the smell of salt water filled her nasal passages.

“Momo, hold still, okay?” Rosemarie clutched the creature close to her chest as it seemed likely to be blown away by the strong winds due to its underarm membranes. Its downy pelt warmed her body ever so slightly.

The howling of the whipping winds pierced her ears in a way that caused her to liken it to the neighs of the Hippocampus. They *shouldn’t* sound anything alike, yet it sent a cold shiver down her spine,

regardless.

Suddenly, she heard the tap of footsteps from the lower floor. Rosemarie gulped, her breath still erratic. The taste of iron rust sat in her mouth.

Tap, tap, tap—the sounds started to rise at a fixed speed, stirring up her fears even more.

Rosemarie tried to get as much distance between her and the staircase as possible. She glanced above her to see the Hippocampus engraved on the bell, almost looking as if it were scoffing at her actions.

“—Oh, I found you!” The elated voice made her turn her attention back to the staircase, where the dirty-blonde dog-headed princess stood, tottering on her feet left and right. The several specks on her off-white dress were most likely bloodstains from when she assaulted Adelina.

“I found you, I found you. I *finally* found you. Your eyes... those *wretched* eyes gazing upon Prince Claudio... If I were to *pluck* them from you, then Prince Claudio will only have eyes for *me*. So, how’s about it? Mind giving me those eyes of yours, *hmm?*” Suzette said with an innocent chuckle and a cute tilt of her head as she brandished the knife. Shivers ran down Rosemarie’s spine. The princess was stark raving mad.

She began to doubt her ability to break the spell now that it was this far along, but she shook her head and cleared the doubts from her mind.

(If I cannot do it, I’m going to end up dead. Plain and simple.)

The canine-headed princess brandished her knife and came running at her. She tried to get out of the way of her charge, but Suzette suddenly uttered some incomprehensible words and changed her course.

“Huh...?” Her leg was tangled. She barely caught herself on the handrail before she ended up taking a fall. Her relief was short-lived, however, as Suzette grabbed her by the collar and lifted her up in an abnormal display of strength. She then pushed her back against the railing. The knife drew closer as the ocean winds blew from underneath the top half of her body hanging over the railing, drawing any heat out of her cheeks. The crashing waves dominated her sense of hearing. That was when something welled up from deep within her. Something that wasn’t fear—*rage*.

“Get over yourself with this *nonsense*! Even if you were to take my eyes, Prince Claudio would *never* give you the time of day. If you could manage that, then what’s stopping you from making you turn his attention on *your own*?! ” She, too, thought these eyes of hers were wretched at first. But now that she had overcome so much and made

it so far, it was nonsensical to think that he would be so easily swayed by another woman just because she presented him with something.

“Shut your mouth, shut your mouth, shut your *damned* mouth!!” Suzette flapped her huge dog jaws over and over, shaking Rosemarie by the collar all the while. Rosemarie grabbed her hands in attempt to stop her.

—Her dilated eyes blinked, as if coming back to her senses. The sensation of something peeling right off—the sensation of the spell being lifted—came over her body.

The next thing Rosemarie knew, Suzette had gone limp. Although Suzette had suddenly released her grip on Rosemarie, she felt her body leaning over—past the railing.

(I’m going to fall!)

Her body froze over, like she had taken a bath in cold water. She reached out, but her fingers didn’t even graze the handrail. She was on a crash course with the cliffside below.

“Rosemarie!!”

That voice hit her ears—the same voice she wanted to hear so badly. Coming into her vision, as she stared with her eyes wide open was Claudio, leaning over, pale in the face.

“Prince Claudio, don’t!”

Faster than she could pull back her outstretched hand, Claudio leaped over the railing and grabbed onto her.

“Claudio!” Edeltraud yelled in a tense tone, ringing in between the gusts of ocean wind, as a strong gale suddenly blew from underneath them and weakened the speed of their fall. Before either of them could identify that the Archmagus had cast a spell, the surface of the water was already upon them, and the two of them dropped into the ocean.

Cold ocean water engulfed Rosemarie’s body. She tried to open her mouth for air, but she found herself unable to keep breathing like that. Her wet clothes turned into weights, making her body sink steadily toward the ocean floor. Rosemarie moved her arms and legs for dear life, trying to stop herself from sinking.

“Quit thrashing! You’ll sink.” Claudio’s voice rang in her ears, which made her finally realize that he was holding on to her.

“Keep a tight grip. We’re close to the shore.” In lieu of a nod to his reassuring command, she put some force behind the arms she had around his neck and clung on. In the next instant, an extremely huge wave engulfed the both of them.



“...!” Just before the water swallowed them both, Claudio shielded her with his own body. Wrapped between the raging waves, she couldn’t tell what was up and what was down. *Wham.* In the midst of the chaos, she felt the shock of slamming into a random spot hard. Claudio’s arms slightly loosened their grip around her body. She tried to cling to his hands for dear life as they slipped away, but she saw a mass of air bubbles escape his mouth.

Her heart froze over. He was going to die. That thought ran through her mind and sent shivers through her body.

(No!!)

The waves once again assaulted them, unfortunately loosening their grips and mercilessly jostling them like leaves tossed into a rip tide.

“... Oww.” The sharp pain snapped Rosemarie back to her senses and she opened her eyes wide, the black reef being the first thing she saw. Before she could breathe easy over being spared, Claudio’s face popped up into her mind.

“Prince... Claudio... where...?” Groggily, she did her best to stand up. Her body stung all over, possibly from cuts caused by the rocks. However, now was not the time to worry about these minor scratches. She had to focus on where Claudio was. He was caught in the same wave, so he should be nearby.

She scanned her surroundings, trying to bear up under her throbbing wounds, and realized that she was inside a cave. The cold ocean water that wet her feet was passing through the natural tunnel and funneling in waves from the outside. Suddenly, she spotted Claudio, a short distance away and collapsed on the ground.

“Prince Claudio!” She walked toward him, occasionally tripping over spots on the rocky floor with poor traction. Seeing Claudio lying face-down on the ground, unmoving, she pushed on his shoulders with shaky hands and turned him on his back.

“Are you okay?! Please, Prince Claudio, say... some... thing... Oh, God. He’s not breathing...” His face, eyes shut tight and pale as a ghost, resembled a corpse, making it seem as though a cold hand had its icy grip around his heart. She slapped at his cheeks, but to no avail. He still wasn’t breathing.

“Artificial respiration... I need to administer artificial respiration.” Rosemarie didn’t know the proper way to administer it, but it was all but certain that Claudio would die if nothing was done.

(Can’t be indecisive... Need to act *now*!)

Claudio’s cheeks were a sharp shade of blue and white, like a chunk of ice. Nevertheless, she placed her hands on them, drew her face near his slightly parted lips, and locked her mouth over them.

Shame and everything else pertaining to it went by the wayside in her mind. All she had was hope and prayer as she attempted to pump air into his lungs.

(Please. Open your eyes... *Please!*)

Noticing something red pass by out the corner of his eye, Claudio looked up from the book he was reading.

This garden was close to the Forbidden Forest and nary a soul came by in fear of the trees. But, in an unusual twist, it seemed someone had done just that. On the other side of the short garden tree was the hair of a person, swaying like a horse tail.

Baltzar's National Foundation Day was a few days away and guests from several lands and several nations have assembled under the castle, but he had never seen someone with such exquisite red hair.

Although he had run away here after being fed up with the constant stream of guests coming to say their hellos, he was just about fed up with his book as well. His curiosity piqued, he took a peek behind the garden tree.

"What are you doing?"

There, diligently scooping soil into a silver bucket, was a red-headed young girl. She seemed two or three years younger than him, putting her at around twelve years old. For a second, he thought she might be a gardener's child. But her outfit was of noticeably higher quality, which suggested she was the daughter of one of the noblemen.

The young girl seemingly ignored his call and kept her eyes fixed on the ground—digging up soil, putting it in the bucket, over and over in that order.

This was less off-putting and more intriguing. It made him wonder what was making her so engrossed in what she was doing that she couldn't hear someone calling her from up close.

"—You seem to be having fun."

"Mm-hmm! Lots of fun!" The girl snapped her head up with a broad smile. Her bright green eyes were alight, her face was smeared with dirt, and she smiled without a care in the world. For some reason, Claudio felt his heart skip just by looking at her.

"W-What am I doing?" he asked himself, confused at how shaken up he was for no apparent reason. The girl then held up some of the soil she had put in the bucket.

"The old gardener where I'm from said that Baltzar's gardens were incredible, but he said it might be because the soil is different from our country, so I figured I'd take some back as a souvenir."

A dirt-cheap souvenir, so to speak. The girl's sweet smile invited Claudio to crack a smile himself.

"Bring it back without permission and you'll be considered a thief, you know."

"Oh, um, well... I thought that just some from the corner of the garden wouldn't hurt... Should I not? Are you from the castle?" the girl asked, cocking her head in genuine concern. Seeing this, Claudio was convinced.

This girl didn't know that he was the Crown Prince of Baltzar. It was extremely refreshing, yet strange.

"Not quite. But I have some acquaintances there, so how about I get permission for you?"

"Really? Oh, thank you!" The girl smiled like a wilted flower coming back into bloom, making Claudio's heart jump once again.

It made the surface-level smiles of the guests that came to greet "Crown Prince Claudio" seem even more like facades. Never before had someone smiled at him in this manner. He didn't know about his late mother, since she died while he was an infant, but not even the widowed King Baltzar ever smiled at his son with such frank and open affection.

(What is going on?)

Claudio put his hand over his chest in response to his quickening pulse, confused and assuming he had come down with something. That was when the mystery girl rose to her feet.

"Oh! That soil over there looks good, too!"

What exactly constitutes *good* soil? He hadn't a clue as to which country she hailed from, but the Baltzar royal palace was home to several paintings and sculptures of the highest quality, as well as a garden that—true to the young girl's words—housed so many different flowers that it made one wonder where they'd been shipped from. However, she gave none of that a passing glance. The only thing that made her eyes positively light up was—dirt. Soil, to be exact.

"Soil, eh? Hahah. You don't say."

"Hey, don't make fun of the soil, okay? There are trees that won't grow unless the soil is from our country. Also, wheat won't grow unless you've got soil. So, don't laugh." The girl's argument was more concise than he imagined—so much so that it ended up impressing Claudio. It caused him to realize how things weren't always how they seem.

"Boy, I'm in love with you. You're quite the character. Say... would you mind coming back tomorrow? I want to chat with you some more," Claudio asked, honest words coming from his mouth. It was a frank manner of speaking which he had to abandon as the Crown Prince of the Magic Nation of Baltzar. The girl smiled once

again, like a flower coming into bloom, and nodded.

When he opened his eyes, the red-headed girl—Rosemarie—was peering at him with tears streaming down her face.

“Prince Claudio! Do you recognize me? Say something!”

“... Soil girl.”

“Huh? P-Pardon? Are you okay? Oh, God. What do I do? Did he take a strong blow to the head?” Rosemarie’s pale face went even paler as Claudio chuckled and waved his hand in response.

“Sorry. Just a joke. I had a dream from my childhood. You’re the Crown Princess of Baltzar, Rosemarie. My royal wife, and my one and only.” He had been dreaming this entire time. No, it wasn’t a dream; he was convinced that all actually happened in the past. Though it was a mystery as to why he wasn’t able to remember an iota of it up until now.

Claudio touched Rosemarie’s tear-streaked face, prompting her to cry even harder.

“Please... don’t subject me to jokes. Not now... please.”

He lifted himself up to console her, but he was suddenly overcome with a nausea from the pit of his stomach. He snapped his head to the side and vomited. In a panic, Rosemarie rubbed his back for him. He then noticed the pounding pain in the back of his head and a tear in his thigh. The scent of blood irritated his nose.

Once his nausea settled down, Claudio finally lifted his head.

“Sorry. My stomach has calmed down.”

“Maybe you should lie down a little while longer... You very nearly drowned and stopped breathing, after all. Do you feel discomfort anywhere else? Also, you have a cut on your temple...” Rosemarie’s hand that rubbed at Claudio’s back lowered in relief. She then brushed away the hair at his temple.

“No, I’m... fine.” He paused and suddenly realized. He realized that something warm was coursing through his body. Despite being soaked in the cold ocean water, the area around his heart was warm, as if being shined on by the sun. The heat he felt was a familiar presence. He lifted up his right hand, stared at it and turned it over.

Suddenly, a mystic pale-blue fire ignited in his palm. Rosemarie looked on in surprise.

“My mana is back... Did you do something?”

“Huh? Oh, um, well, I did... administer some... artificial respiration.”

Claudio stared at Rosemarie’s lips as her cheeks flushed and her eyes darted around, then slowly put his hand up to his face. His fingers felt not the usually animal fur he was so used to, but actual human skin, which meant that his face had probably reverted back to its human form.

“What is the meaning of this? We’ve tried so many times before, so why am I back to normal now, of all times...?” His confusion overshadowed his elation. As Claudio began to ponder this mystery, Rosemarie turned her beet-red face away from him. She suddenly sneezed, however, catching Claudio’s attention.

“Oh, you must be cold. I’ll blow the water away,” he said, waving his hand to the side, summoning a wind that swept away the moisture from the both of them. Their clothes remained wet, however. He wasn’t able to completely dry them off, but it probably eased up the temperature a tad.

“You’ve saved my life yet again. Thank you. You’re not injured, are you?”

“No... I’m not. It was all thanks to you shielding me out there... Um, is there any pain in your leg? You’re bleeding quite a lot,” Rosemarie pointed out, which caused him to finally notice the considerable amount of blood flowing on the ground where he was sitting.

“Thanks, but I’ll manage.” He took off his jacket, ripped off his shirt sleeve, and quickly tied off the wound. Hopefully this would keep the wound from getting aggravated any further. And while it would make moving a tad more difficult, it was an acceptable price to pay.

“Um... Can you not fix your wound with magic? I remember Mage Edel healing Adelina’s wounds...” Rosemarie looked on in confusion. Claudio shrugged his shoulders in reply.

“I’m assuming they just stopped the bleeding. If you try too hard to heal with magic, it puts a burden on the body. Also, I’m not very apt in regard to healing spells. Nevertheless... I really owe you. Suppose I’d better say my thanks to Master Edel, as well.” If they had fallen straight down with nothing to soften their descent, they probably would have slammed onto the cliffside reef. But thanks to Edeltraud’s magical wind spell, they were spared.

“Did Princess Suzette not fall?”

“She’s probably all right. Master Edel probably didn’t save her, but Alto was around. That being said, you’re far too softhearted. You’re actually *worried* whether the girl who tried to *kill* you is dead or alive?” Claudio let out an exasperated sigh as he saw Rosemarie looking up toward the belfry in concern. She gave a slight nod in response.

“I’m also angry about the whole ordeal, but now that I know that a spell was amplifying her hatred, it’s quite hard *not* to be concerned for her life.”

—“You really *are* too softhearted for your own good.” That was the very reason she was bound to get in trouble unless he kept an eye

on her.

With a wry grin, Claudio reached into the pocket of his discarded jacket and revealed the gift he'd given Rosemarie before they'd set off for the Holy Land: her Kaola pendant.

"When I found this pendant in the saint's chapel, I was scared half to death."

"—Oh! I was so sad that I accidentally dropped your precious gift to me. Thank you so much for returning it!" Rosemarie smiled from ear to ear, like a flower coming into bloom. The same girl whose eyes lit up at the sight of soil back in his youth was now overwhelmed with joy at a present he'd given her. The very thought of that instilled in him a sense of satisfaction that filled his heart with warmth.

"How did I forget all of that...?" He held a handful of his bangs in frustration.

He had forgotten everything from back then—the warmth he felt, the adoration he had, the sight of that carefree smile of hers—and continued to detest Rosemarie for seven long years. And his magic being stolen probably wasn't the cause; *something* suppressed his memories, and it happened *after* that chance encounter.

"Are your wounds bothering you?" Rosemarie asked, looking into his face with concern.

Just as he was about to assure her that he was fine, an eardrum-splitting animal cry echoed throughout the cave.

Hearing the eardrum-splitting animal cry, Rosemarie found herself covering her ears.

"What is that sound?" Claudio grimaced as he held one of his ears in similar fashion.

"You can hear it as well, Prince Claudio? This is the voice that has been calling me this whole time." She didn't know why Claudio was also suddenly able to hear it, though. Perhaps it was because she returned his mana?

"Sounds less like a voice and more like someone getting strangled. Is it coming from deeper inside the cave?" Claudio's face took a stern turn as his eyes headed toward the darkness of the cave before them. The evening sunlight was shining in through the naturally-formed entrance, but the weak light wasn't able to illuminate all the way inside.

"Is it... the Hippocampus?"

"I'm going to assume it is."

The brain-jostling, pained cry suddenly stopped. And almost simultaneously, a red and gold light shone from his chest.

"Gah, it's hot! What's going on? The Sacred Relic just started

heating up.” Claudio scrambled to remove the sack containing the Sacred Relic from his breast pocket. The light grew even stronger and burned through the sack entirely. Rosemarie stuck her hand out in attempts to catch the Sacred Relic before it spilled out of the sack onto the ground.

“Don’t touch it!” Claudio screamed at nearly the same time as the Sacred Relic fell into her palm.

The heat lasted for a split second. The red-gold light disappeared as if it melded into Rosemarie. The gentle warmth in her body was alight for all but a second before immediately dissipating.

Claudio wasted no time in picking up the Sacred Relic and touched Rosemarie’s palm to check its condition.

“Nothing happened to it. Did you... absorb the mana just now?”

“I don’t know. But it felt different from when I broke those spells.” She stared at her hand closely while opening and closing it.

(Did I really absorb it? If that was the case, then I’ve absorbed the mana I just returned to Prince Claudio...)

The doubts that she had almost forgotten reared their heads again. Claudio contemplated as he clasped the Sacred Relic for a bit, then lifted his head.

“We’ve already made it this far, so we might as well return the Sacred Relic to the Hippocampus. State of the church be damned. This thing glowing like that most likely means the beast is close. Let’s head out.”

“D-Don’t!” Rosemarie dodged Claudio’s hand as it came for her own, clutching it to her chest and standing back.

“You shouldn’t touch me. I’ll end up stealing the mana I just returned to you again. And I’m guessing the reason why your head reverted back to beast form is because I stole your mana...”

Claudio looked as if he was being lied to, his face scrunching up for a second as though hurt, eventually ending up as a scowl. He then forcibly took Rosemarie’s hand and proceeded to walk. Rosemarie tried desperately to free her hand out of the fear of the repercussions.

“Please, let go of me, Prince Claudio!”

“Shut up. If touching you stole away my mana, then it’d be stolen the second I touched your palm earlier,” Claudio distinctly asserted, to which Rosemarie refuted in confusion, regardless.

“Yes, but you saw how I broke the spell that was cast on Adelina.”

“Breaking a spell and stealing mana are two different things. You can remove what’s on the surface, but extracting the roots is an entirely different story.”

“But Mage Edel never touches me with their bare hands.”

“Master Edel has never had their mana stolen and returned. There’s no precedent for them. There is, however, one for me. If I

were to have my mana stolen again, then all it would mean is getting it back again.” He had an answer for everything she said. Although it didn’t serve to completely eliminate her doubts, Claudio’s quick responses were rather reassuring.

She returned the grip that Claudio had on her hand as he silently led her into the cave. Feeling her reciprocate, he followed in form by giving her hand a firm squeeze back, facing forward all the while. Claudio staggered on his feet slightly. Recalling the wound he suffered on his leg, Rosemarie hurried to prop him up under his arm.

“Thanks. Appreciate it.” With Rosemarie as Claudio’s crutch, they slowly proceed deeper into the cave. As they pressed on, a tinge of blood wafted through the air and mixed with the aroma of the salt water.

“On your guard. I have a bad feeling.” Claudio lowered his voice, his tone stern and serious. Rosemarie bit her lip, telling herself not to scream no matter what she saw... and that pained cry hit her ears once again. At the same time, she heard the heavy sound of scraping metal. It was a sound that you would never expect in a place like this, which was sending Rosemarie’s pulse into a frenzy.

The evening sun shining through the entrance was getting even dimmer as they traversed. Claudio quickly waved his unoccupied hand. Blue flames spawned in sync with his movement, illuminating the interior of the cave.

“—?!”

“What in the...?”

What they laid their eyes on left them both speechless.

Its upper half was that of a gallant white horse, with a long fish tail covered in sparkling, blue, gem-like scales.

There, in the dome-shaped area, was the same Hippocampus depicted in various places all over the cathedral—the entrance, the altar, even the tapestries in the guest rooms.

However, as it lay limply on the ground, a thick collar could be seen around its neck with a sturdy chain extending from it. The chain was connected to the bedrock within the cave. Upon ever closer inspection, they saw smaller chains around its limbs keeping it constrained to the ground. Either the collar itself was causing discomfort or there was something set up inside the collar. Either way, several streaks of blood flowed from its neck.

“This is... horrific.” As for who did this, it was obvious without even giving it much thought.

She had never felt this way—so enraged that her body was literally shaking. Rosemarie’s murmur caught the ear of the Hippocampus and it stirred. A sad cry similar to the one from earlier escaped its throat.

—*Beloved of the Sacred Beast. Come, come, come.*

The Hippocampus stood up on groggy feet, opening its eyes. They were like a beautiful sunset compressed into a small, dark red orb, but they soon realized something off—it only had one eye, not two. Claudio pieced it together from the unique color and dropped his gaze upon the Sacred Relic in his grasp.

“Don’t tell me... this is the Hippocampus’s eye?” Claudio said, his voice cracking with surprise. There seemed to be a considerable size difference, but the color was so similar that it was preposterous to think it was anything other.

The Hippocampus neighed.

—*My eye! Return my eye, human! Damn all of you for taking advantage of my kindness!* The voice of the Hippocampus echoes through the cave, shaking the bedrock. The Hippocampus stood up with enough momentum to yank off the chain as streaks of blood ran from its neck yet again.

The people of the Holy Land captured the Hippocampus, robbed it of its freedom and, to make matters worse, took one of its eyes—all so the Holy Land could keep operating. And even now, it was still in captivity.

—*I shall steal the eyes from him just as I did the smallings and use it to feed my mana.*

The chains binding it rattled and clattered. Miniscule flakes and pebbles dropped to the ground as its tail, the only free part of its body, waved around and smacked against the bedrock.

“The smallings.” So, it was the Hippocampus who stole those small animals’ eyes and made dried husks out of their bodies, after all? Going off that logic, seeing as how it was being held prisoner here, it likely had no other choice but to use Suzette to bring them down here.

Rosemarie snatched the Sacred Relic from Claudio’s hand and stepped toward the Hippocampus.

“I’m returning it! In return, don’t take Prince Claudio’s eyes.”

“Stop!” Claudio yelled to keep her from advancing, but an abnormally huge boulder fell in between him and his wife. Rosemarie flinched for a second, but then used the opportunity to run to the Hippocampus’s side.

A seemingly endless stream of blood from its towering body mixed with the ocean water flowing into the cave, muddling it. It was almost as if the water was dyed in the same dark conceptions that dwelled in this cathedral, evoking not only sadness, but rage.

“This is your eye. I hope that it quells your rage and—”

Rosemarie held out the Sacred Relic and the Hippocampus stomped its feet and rattled its chain.

—Aah, aah, Beloved. You have the most enchanting aroma. The aroma of the finest mana mixed with the sweetest fruit. It matters not if the Silver Lion has partially eaten of you. I shall consume every bit of your blood, your flesh, your soul until not even a morsel remains!

Before the Hippocampus's cry of glee could sink into Rosemarie's mind, it opened its mouth wide—not for its own eye which she held in her hand, but for her throat instead.

“Rosemarie!”

As the image of the beast ripping her throat out flashed through her mind, a bright light leaped out from her chest and affixed itself to the Hippocampus's face. At almost the same time, Claudio tripped her off her feet and pulled her toward him. He then proceeded to keep her in his arms as they rolled to the side, and before she even had a chance to sit up, Rosemarie stared in shock at what she laid her eyes upon.

“W-What the... is that...?”

“It's the squirrel.”

The flower emblem on its forehead was shining even brighter than when they were wandering the bypaths before, but the flying squirrel that pasted itself onto the Hippocampus's single eye was indeed the same one she had named Momo. She had almost forgotten that it had been tucked away in the bodice of her dress.

The Hippocampus shook its head to free itself of the tiny creature, but Momo was stuck to its face like glue.

“Now's our chance to get away.”

“But we can't leave Momo to...”

“Take a good look. It'll be fine. That's no regular flying squirrel. It's a sacred beast.”

“A *what?*!” Rosemarie exclaimed as white, shining flower petals erupted from the glowing flower on the squirrel's forehead, gradually covering the Hippocampus's body. Each petal that stuck to the Hippocampus stilled its movements a bit more, until its gigantic body eventually toppled over. Once it did, the squirrel climbed up the felled Hippocampus and sat atop it triumphantly with its head held high.

“Momo, you're incredible...” Rosemarie stood there, dumbfounded, and the squirrel took to the air in delight. But in the next moment, the Hippocampus drew all its energy into a yell and rose to its feet.

—Damn you, damn you, damn you! Cut from the same cloth, yet consorting with humans!

A number of the chains that bound its body rattled and clanked, then burst off. The cave quaked, cracked, and eventually went into a full-blown collapse.

“You've pissed it off even more!” Claudio defended them against

the falling boulders with magic, shielding Rosemarie with his body as well as he held her. Rosemarie looked up at the crumbling cave ceiling in wide-eyed shock.

“The top of this cave... is the cathedral?!” The ceiling—or the floor to those above—gave way, causing a bevy of candles, bedding, and other housekeeping supplies to tumble down on them. While it was too dark to get a good look, the ornate decorations that lined the walls of the church were visible.

“Now it makes sense. *This* was the tenth floor blocked off by the collapsed staircase,” Claudio deduced, looking bitter.

The Hippocampus’s thrashing over the course of time probably weakened the ceiling until it became weak enough to give way. As the creature bucked violently about, the chains wrapped around it dug into it even deeper in a painful and pitiful display.

“Defeating it with magic would be simple, but I’d rather not... Need to pacify it some other way...”

“Your Highnesses! Are you both all right over there?!” From the other side of the crumbling bedrock came a familiar voice. They looked in its direction and were greeted with the sight of Alto’s panicked face poking through a crack in the bedrock.

“Your Highness Claudio, your face is back to normal, I see! Hold still, I’ll be right there!” Alto tried to widen the gap to get to the couple, but Claudio stopped him.

“Stay back, Alto. We’re both safe. I don’t want to agitate this Hippocampus any more than it already is.”

Alto, speechless, obediently backed away.

Rosemarie watched their back-and-forth unfold, but was distracted by the sound of a tiny clang from over her chest caused by the squirrel. When she looked down to see what it was doing, she found it chewing at Claudio’s gift, the Kaola pendant.

“Momo, no nibbling, okay?” she said, trying to pry it away, but Claudio picked it up from the side with a stern, serious expression. The squirrel dangled from the pendant all the while.

“The Hippocampus mentioned something or another about an ‘enchanted aroma.’ What if I were to tell you that *this* thing was the reason it called you?”

“Huh...?” Spelling it out like that, it was possible; she remembered it saying a lot of things before. After all, she was the only one wearing a pendant like this.

“That squirrel has an odd fascination for Kaola, too. Well, time to go all in on this hunch. I’ll be taking this.” Claudio removed the squirrel from the pendant, then removed the pendant from Rosemarie. Then, wrapping it in magical blue flames, he hoisted it up.

“Hippocampus. I’ve got a nice little present for you. Take it!”

Claudio let loose the Kaola pendant from his hand as if he were firing an arrow. The Hippocampus opened wide and caught the pendant in mid-air, crunching down on it. And as soon as it did, it was instantly set ablaze.

The creature let out a shriek akin to a death rattle, filled with a whole new level of sadness and bitterness. Its head thrown back and facing upward, the Hippocampus collapsed to the ground, shivering, and the collar around its neck came off with a sound like shattering glass.

“P-Prince Claudio, did you... kill it?” The Hippocampus was motionless, making Rosemarie go pale. Humans were the reason for its terrible fate in the first place; she couldn’t bear the idea of humans also being the cause of its demise.

“No, I didn’t put that much force into it. It should’ve been just enough to bring it back to its right mind, though.”

Rosemarie tried to approach the Hippocampus. A piece of bedrock came loose overhead, but Claudio summoned up a magical wind and shattered it. The dust from the bedrock parted, and the white and blue beast burst through it, charging straight at her.

“Huh, what...?!” Rosemarie stood stock still, unable to flee the Hippocampus charging at her. It lunged at her, grabbed the hem of her dress, and dragged her into the ocean.

She was dunked in the cold ocean water once again with a splash. Her lungs grew hot in need of air.

“—!!”

She thought she heard Claudio shouting something between the sounds of the waves, but she couldn’t be sure as he body sank farther and farther into the briny depths. Fear was the furthest thing from her mind; all she could think about was how she was literally suffocating.

(But I relinquished the Kaola...!!)

Suddenly, the Hippocampus stopped its descent to the ocean floor and released its grip on her clothes. It then came charging at her at a speed unlike anything that walked on dry land. She felt as though death was drawing near.

(No! I haven’t even returned Prince Claudio his mana! I still haven’t given him a proper response!)

Her regrets stung her chest more than her lack of oxygen. If she had known this was going to happen, she would have given him an answer right away.

Just as her regret-riddled consciousness was slipping away, she felt her body yanked upward and begin to rise toward the surface, as though something was pulling at her. It wasn’t long before her head broke the surface, granting it sweet freedom from the water.

Clueless as to what was happening, she started to take a deep

breath—but felt herself lifted even higher. It was almost as though she was being tossed out of the ocean. The bizarre feeling of weightlessness sent her insides into confusion. She closed her eyes, holding back nausea. After a few seconds in the air, Rosemarie felt herself being caught by something mysteriously soft yet firm.

“I almost had a heart attack back there.” Once the familiar voice graced her ears, she softly opened her eyes to see Claudio, who was embracing her with his face paler than a sheet of paper. She also saw the reef all around them, so it seemed they were shoreside.

“But... I was just...”

“I used a spell to take you back. See? The Hippocampus is getting away.”

A horse’s neigh echoed from the ocean’s surface. Rosemarie looked in its direction with a gasp to see the Hippocampus leaping high into the sky. And watching it do so was a silver-maned creature with a pair of elegant wings and black horns shining in the setting evening sun—the Silver Lion. For whatever reason, its appearance frightened her, and she clutched her own arms. The Silver Lion’s form then started to slowly dissipate into the sunset.



“Was that the real Silver Lion...?” She remembered seeing the beast back at Claudio’s mana inquiry when he was pressing Archbishop Kastner for his various crimes.

Claudio silently shook his head. “No, it’s not. It’s a familiar I made from my concentrated mana. Or, to put it more simply, it’s a mana-made illusion.”

Rosemarie tried to comprehend all of this with her muddled mind, which made her suddenly realize something terrible.

“Oh, no! We haven’t returned the Sacred Relic to the Hippocampus!”

“It probably won’t come back to retrieve it. Not even a Sacred Beast can put a lost part of their body back in place.”

“You’re kidding...”

“—Damn all of you for taking advantage of my kindness!”

The Hippocampus’s cry popped back into her mind. Maybe, despite all its claims, it wasn’t asking for its eye back; maybe it wanted to regain its trust for humans.

Perhaps it couldn’t bear to be sentimental about things. It was forced to take a long, hard look at the result of being bent to the selfish desires of man.

Those thoughts occupied Rosemarie’s mind as she stood next to Claudio, watching the Hippocampus swim off. She grabbed Claudio’s sleeve absentmindedly.

“Your Highness! The coast is clear now, isn’t it? I’m coming over there now!” The bedrock suddenly crumbled, accompanied by a loud battle cry. There stood Alto, his leg still raised after the powerful kick he’d delivered to the rock from the opposite side. And next to him, much to Rosemarie’s surprise, was the young chambermaid with her hair in braids.

“Adelina! What are you doing here? What about your injuries?!”

“No, I’m fine. I led the Squire all the way here, after all... But that was... the Hippocampus, wasn’t it? Those chains... were keeping it captive? Also, why is the crown prince’s face human now?” Adelina asked with a tensed expression, to which Rosemarie nodded back while gritting her teeth, vexed.

“Well, yes, but...” If she told Adelina the fault lay with the clergymen of the very cathedral in which she lived, it might come as too much of a shock. As Rosemarie stood there, clueless as to what to say to the speechless Adelina, Claudio sighed.

“We’ll talk later. Let’s head up for now. Alto, where are the others?”

“Sir! Mage Edeltraud is supporting the structure so that there will be no further collapsing. Father Fritz is leading the Cardinal to the

surface. Her Highness's maid is evacuating in similar fashion."

Behind Claudio as he listened Alto's status report, Rosemarie put her hand on Adelina's back.

"I will make sure to fill you in; for now, let's go back up." Although it didn't sit well on her conscience, Rosemarie had no other choice but to tell her that.

The dark red jewel with gold shavings was placed on the table with a *click*. Sitting across from Rosemarie and Claudio, the brown dog-headed Cardinal's eyes opened to the size of saucers.

"Why, this is... the Sacred Relic! Why are you in possession of this, Prince Claudio?" asked the Cardinal in an inquisitive tone, coupled with a brown-nosing look in his eyes. The sight made Rosemarie so uncomfortable, she had to look away.

The Cardinal, the bishops, and other members of clergy who helped oversee the Holy Land were assembled in the dining hall. The only individuals who were devoid of beast heads at the moment were the three aides who stood behind them... and Ilse. She found herself cowering more in anxiety than fear.

The day before yesterday, the Hippocampus ran amok and caused a collapse in the cathedral, which was contained to a cave-in of the floor on the ninth floor and cracks on the eighth. It seemed that with some repair work, the floors would be back to a useable state—not entirely back to the way they were, but useable, nonetheless.

Now, in order to shed some light on the recent series of incidents, they had come to confront the Cardinal and his subordinates.

"The Sacred Relic? This right here is the eye of the Hippocampus, which many people bore witness to. For some inexplicable reason, it found its way into my room. Seeing as how it had traces of mana in it, I took the liberty of holding onto it for safekeeping. It's interesting, though. It's similar to the Sacred Relic, isn't it?"

It was true. This was the Hippocampus's eye. Claudio's statement carried with it the implication that he couldn't be charged with theft of a Sacred Relic, which made the Cardinal's dog head shiver slightly.

After the collapse in the cathedral the day before yesterday, so many people witnessed the Hippocampus fleeing away to the ocean that there was no way the clergy could talk their way out of it.

"Yes, quite similar. So, is that pertinent?"

"Well, I figured it would be quite problematic on the off chance that it was swapped with the Sacred Relic." Claudio knitted his brows in concern as he stared at the Cardinal. The Cardinal responded in turn by clamming himself up. The Cardinal had commented that Claudio's face returning to human form was a miracle of God, but he

seemed to be even more tense than he had been when confronted with the prince's beast head.

"I have heard that the number of people complaining of health issues has increased over the past year. When I inquired further, I discovered that the practice of drinking holy water *also* started a year ago. If the Sacred Relic and the Hippocampus's eye were swapped out around that time, that would explain the health problems."

"—What do you mean by that, exactly?" There was the slightest traces of fear flashing on and off in the Cardinal's eyes. Claudio saw this and grimaced, disappointed.

"The Hippocampus's eye has mana. If one drinks of water imbued with its mana, some people will have a crazed episode like the Princess of Kavan. But, for many, it slowly seeps into the body like poison, weakening and eventually killing them. That's what happens when you introduce mana into an unprotected body. It's quite unpleasant."

The dining hall was astir with noise. Some placed a hand to themselves, looking rather on edge, while others stared in Claudio and his entourage's general direction imploringly. More than likely, almost everyone in the hall had drunk of the holy water.

"If your health has been suffering, then let my wife look at you later. She has gotten used to handling this issue. You'll likely recover in no time. That is, *if* you drank of the water the Hippocampus's eye was dipped in, of course," Claudio said with a dauntless smile as Rosemarie softly pressed a hand to her stomach. As she stood next to Claudio while he gave out information piecemeal to gauge the Cardinal's reactions, a grinding pain hit her stomach. It made her wonder if this was all in a day's work for him.

The Cardinal balled his fists so tightly on the table that they were turning as white as his now pale face. In the midst of the now clamorous dining hall, only one of the people representing the Holy Land maintained his composure: the white-haired bishop. He drew a sigh.

"—I believe I *did* advise that we should cease the consumption of holy water."

"W-What are you saying, Ilse?" The Cardinal remained flustered as Ilse looked at Claudio and his entourage with his same tranquil countenance. Surprised, Rosemarie's back straightened out naturally. She had no idea what was going through the Bishop's mind.

"Prince Claudio, please speak of everything that you have investigated, if you would. I know that you are renowned for your intelligence. And I am sure that you are already well aware of what is happening here in the Holy Land." Ilse stared at Claudio, who returned the look without so much as flinching.

“The one who snuck the Sacred Relic into our room using the chambermaid was you, Bishop Lancel.”

“—That is correct. I did it because I knew you would bring a conclusion to this situation.” Ilse divulged his intentions with ease, causing the Cardinal to glare a hole through him.

“Ilse, *you* stole it?”

“I *borrowed* it, sir. Your Eminence, Prince Claudio has already exposed the existence of the Hippocampus to many. I believe that you should prepare yourself for the worst,” Ilse informed the Cardinal, who then silenced himself.

Claudio held out his hand to Fritz, who was standing behind him. Attentively, Fritz placed a stack of documents in it.

“The amount of mined salt has been on an extreme decline since a year ago. At the same time, the number of baptisms via holy water and donations has been on the rise. And I predict that you started drinking holy water as a way to get even more donations. Although it’s holy water... it seems to be akin to poison.” Claudio spread the documents across the table, then folded his arms and glared at the Cardinal.

“The visitors who started drinking holy water for whatever reason would probably come back, donating ludicrous amounts so they could drink it again. Those types would crop up by the droves and the donations began to grow. You had more repeat donors than ever before. In which case, losing the Sacred Relic became less and less of an option. And you weren’t able to release the Hippocampus on the off chance that you weren’t able to use the Sacred Relic anymore. It was an endless cycle. Now, with all that said... care to point out any part of my statement that may differ from the truth?”

Dead, tense silence filled the room. And as no one budged an inch, the Cardinal languidly turned his head toward the heavens.

“—I suppose it was inevitable. Just as you have said, our salt reserves are diminishing. It is becoming difficult to maintain a living. Not only that, but it affected the lives of the people of this land. The case of the holy water was a godsend.”

While the Cardinal was disclosing the painful truth to everyone, Rosemarie’s eyes still saw his head as that of a brown dog. He wasn’t thinking about the people’s interests in the slightest. Enraged at that, Rosemarie slowly brought herself closer to Claudio.

“Prince Claudio.” Rosemarie whispered Claudio’s name, and she nodded once he made eye contact with her. Getting the signal, Claudio lightly tapped Rosemarie’s hand in response.

“—I see. I thought that if you had just laid everything out truthfully, then I wouldn’t have to investigate any further, but... I guess I will have to report this case to His Excellency the Pope at the

Holy See—along with these reports.”

“What the devil...?”

Fritz handed him another set of documents, which he thrust before the Cardinal. The Cardinal looked back and forth between the paper and Claudio in an almost comical manner.

“Before coming to the Holy Land, I had a background check run on you. It seems that you have been out and about to various nations having a grand time under the pretense of it being an ‘observation.’ That includes our nation of Baltzar, of course. I am sure that His Excellency would lament in hearing such news,” Claudio said, his intrepid face gaining a clever smirk.

The Cardinal lurched onto the table, clutching at his head. As he did so, paladins of the church came through the entrance of the dining hall, picked him up, and carted him away.

The others, partially out of fear of getting wrapped up in trouble themselves, didn’t even try to go and help the Cardinal.

As that all transpired, Claudio suddenly rose to his feet and—for reasons Rosemarie couldn’t fathom—walked over to Ilse.

The prince then opened his mouth, saying, “I assume this is sufficient... Mage Lene?”

Ilse, who watched emotionlessly as the Cardinal was carted away, blinked a few times before his lips curled themselves into a smile.

“—Y’did a mighty fine job, Prince.”

Gathered under the saint’s chapel in the grand underground cathedral, members of clergy all decked in dazzling garb stood in prayer. And enshrined in its altar on display was the Sacred Relic, dark red luster and all.

With a solemn atmosphere, the Sacred Relic Worship ceremony was held in silent reverence.

Rosemarie, in attendance with Claudio and the other guests, stared vacantly at the clergy. But upon spotting Ilse in the crowd, she felt the urge to let out a sigh.

—“*Y’did a mighty fine job, Prince.*”

Those words that threw his tranquil demeanor right out the window and the cynical smile that curled his lips had left Rosemarie utterly flabbergasted.

Although what was revealed after those words shocked her to the core even more.

(To think it was Bishop Lancel all along... That he was Mage Lene, the former guard of the Forbidden Forest...)

He looked to be in his late twenties. She had envisioned him as an old man, nearly forgetting that sorcerers look younger than their true

age. And since serving as guard of the Forbidden Forest made one look younger still, it made sense in retrospect.

She had absolutely no clue as to what led to him serving the position he did. They had decided to ask for the whole story once the Sacred Relic Worship ceremony was over.

Claudio seemed to be slightly dubious; Edeltraud, on the other hand, appeared to be actively avoiding any eye contact with Lene.

They dipped the Sacred Relic into sea water. The bishop reverently held the container, which now ought to be filled with fresh holy water, and began to sprinkle it upon the foreheads of the attendees in order.

Since Rosemarie had wiped it of mana while in the cave, where the Hippocampus was imprisoned, the eye of the Hippocampus—the Sacred Relic—no longer had any power within it. The Relic wouldn't turn sea water into fresh water no matter how much you dipped it, nor would it turn it into poisonous, mana-imbued water.

However, there were already so many worshipers in attendance that the Sacred Relic Worship went on as planned, albeit a few days later than scheduled. It was up in the air as to what would happen starting the following year, but Claudio pointed out how difficult it would be to continue without disclosing the whole truth. Although that point was concerning, they couldn't stick his nose into this business any further.

Rosemarie had already touched the people afflicted by the Hippocampus's mana and brought them back around. Suzette was also back to her right mind, but she had positively no memory of what she had done.

The Sacred Relic Worship concluded without a hitch. And, though she couldn't be sure whether it meant she had been cured, Rosemarie couldn't see a single beast head in the crowd.

“Heya, nice work out there, Princey Boy.”

As the Sacred Relic Worship concluded, Claudio, Rosemarie, and Edeltraud headed toward the location they were told to rendezvous at—the belfry. Sitting there waiting, while the strong ocean winds blew by, was the sorcerer they had been looking for.

Sitting on the belfry's railing, Lene gave a good-natured greeting and dropped from his makeshift seat with a bounce of his long white hair. He had traded his extravagant priest's garb for a regular sorcerer's robe of dark blue. “Regular,” that is, save for multicolored stitching along the edges, which made it quite festive.

“So, Princey, when did you realize that I was Lene?”

“Around the time we broke the spell on Adelina is when I had my

doubts.” Claudio answered in a cool and collected manner, which made Rosemarie look at him in surprise.

(Now that I think about it, Mage Edel did tell us what kind of personality he had.)

He probably thought something was fishy around then.

Lene laughed aloud. “—Woo, boy, scary look y’got there. I still can’t get over how strange it is, you know. Never would’ve guessed the majestic Silver Lion-headed crown price would be such a sour-pussed lad.”

“Well, you’re unbelievably sprightly and in good health for someone as *old* as my homeland, so from your perspective, yes. I’m quite naturally a ‘lad,’ as you put it.” Rosemarie watched, somewhat unnerved, as the stinging repartee played out. Suddenly, Lene looked her way, and her shoulders jumped in surprise.

“Are you afraid? Come, now, we were on friendly enough terms before. We were chattin’ about all sorts of things up here. Hey now, enough with the stink eye. Your jealousy is as wide as the sea, Princey Boy.” Lene jovially poked fun until Edeltraud, who accompanied them both, suddenly walked up—and swiftly whacked Lene over the head.

“...Yow! Edel, you son of a...! Is that how you treat your *master* after years of not seeing them? By *punching* them across the damned head?!”

“Your fault Claudio got injured, Master Lene. If just revealed identity right away, there’d be no problem.” Edeltraud’s expression was just as unflinching as usual, their eyes staring straight ahead with intent.

Seeing Edeltraud take out their anger on Lene, Claudio cleared his throat to defuse the situation. “Master Edel, save the fisticuffs for later. I’d like to cut straight to the chase. Mage Lene, why did you pose as a clergyman here in the Holy Land for a whole year?”

“Well, naturally, my number one objective was figuring out what the Sacred Relic really was. Though, when I tried gettin’ to the bottom of the mystery, my social standing made me incapable of getting involved. That made for a whole boatload of issues, let me tell you.” Lene shrugged in disappointment, leaning across the railing and shooting a look Rosemarie’s way.

“So, since you scratched my back by solving the case, I’m supposing you want to know about how the princess here is doing, right?”

“Huh? Me...?” The subject suddenly swung to Rosemarie, whose head shot up, startled.

She had thought that he would bring up Claudio, with the Seed of Mana-Sealing within his body, not her. Claudio seemed caught off guard as well as he looked inquisitively at Lene.

“Rosemarie? No, not her. I mean, yes, ever since stealing my mana, her vision has been off as a result, but...”

“Hm? You mean, that’s not it? Didn’t you come here to ask me to give the princess’s soul a once-over since Edel’s eyes aren’t as good for that?”

Rosemarie’s and Claudio’s collective gaze fell upon Edeltraud.

“Master Edel, what is he talking about?”

“Mage Edel, is there something wrong with my soul?”

One was perplexed while the other was concerned, but Edeltraud spoke up unapologetically, nonetheless.

“If told the truth, you’d be too worried; never let Volland Princess out of country. Never be able to fish out Master Lene that way. Money no good to enlist him. Need something else. Something like this time.”

“Ahahaha, well, that’s ’bout right. My services come at a high price. One that money can’t buy,” Lene said with a hearty laugh that didn’t reach his eyes.

Was he saying you had to buy his cooperation in gratitude rather than money?

“You should know, too, Claudio. I’m not good at seeing condition of souls. But I sensed something odd about Volland Princess’s soul. Thought that might be reason why memories are vague and can’t return mana.” Edeltraud’s explanation filled Rosemarie with an unfamiliar sense of dread, and she hugged herself tightly in the face of it.

Claudio grabbed Rosemarie’s shoulders and, somewhat forcefully, pulled her closer. “I understand your point, Master Edel. While there is a long list of things I’d like to voice my dissatisfaction about, the Sacred Relic business had a safe conclusion, so I’ll let it slide. So, then... what is Rosemarie’s condition?”

Claudio’s sharp gaze fell upon Lene. Rosemarie also looked at Lene, but in a more timid manner. Lene squinted at them silently by way of an initial response, then let out a sigh.

“...Princess, m’girl, your soul’s chipped. Something’s been... gnawing at it.”



Lene stared at Rosemarie intently and with interest, his statements taking Rosemarie's breath away.

"Gnawing...?"

"Yep, something's been nibbling at it. Ah-ha, that makes sense. So, you've been compensating for that with Princey's stolen mana, eh? Said you had problems with your vision? I bet you do. You're practically forcing it to compensate. It's causing a distortion."

"S-So, that would mean that seeing negative emotions manifest as beasts and seeing Prince Claudio's head as a beast temporarily was all..."

—*Aah, aah, Beloved. You have of the most enchanting aroma. The aroma of the finest mana mixed with the sweetest fruit. It matters not if the Silver Lion has partially eaten of you. I shall consume every bit of your blood, your flesh, your soul until not even a morsel remains!*

The Hippocampus's words suddenly resurfaced in her mind. Upon comprehending that Lene's words were indeed correct, she felt tremors from the depths of her heart. She felt her legs about to give out on her, but Claudio caught her in his arms before she had a chance to fall.

"Are you telling me the Silver Lion has been *eating* her?" Claudio murmured in confirmation, voice tensed. He probably remembered the same thing she did.

"The Silver Lion? It can't leave the Forbidden Forest, though. How would that happen?" Lene raised an eyebrow in open suspicion.

Managing to digest the blow she suffered, Rosemarie then started to speak. She couldn't just let Claudio handle everything on his own. "When I was a child, I got lost in the Forbidden Forest. That was when I stole Prince Claudio's mana after he came looking for me... My memories of the ordeal are hazy, but I do remember being attacked by the Silver Lion..."

"Princess, lemme see your face for a sec."

Lene beckoned with his hand, his face suddenly serious. Rosemarie walked away from Claudio toward him, albeit with hesitation. Lene lifted her chin and peered into her eyes. His pair of pale blue eyes were like blades of ice that dug deep into her body, scaring her.

Lene tilted his head in confusion after staring at Rosemarie for a while. Once he did, he brought his face next to Rosemarie's ear. For a second, she had no idea what he was trying to do to her.

"What are you doing? Get away from her." Once Claudio yanked her back to him with an extremely displeased shout, Rosemarie finally regained her senses and blushed.

"Ooh, beet-red, I see. Hey... don't be angry, Princey Boy. I was just

checking her scent.”

“Lucky you did that to familiar girl. Pervert’s work, otherwise. Got that, Master Lene?”

At Edeltraud’s calm yet angry comment, Lene waved his hand in front of his face with a tensed expression. “Oh, come on. I wasn’t trying to make any funny passes. Anyway... Princess? You and I both hail from Volland, right? Kaola is your favorite drink? The stuff indigenous to Volland?”

“Y-Yes, it is. I’ve been drinking it ever since I was a child,” Rosemarie answered, flustered. Lene stroked his chin sternly.

“—I knew it. There’s your reason for y’getting eaten. As I’m sure you already know by now, that scent seems to attract Sacred Beasts. In the princess’s case, she likely has the type of soul Sacred Beasts prefer. And on top of that, with all that Kaola scent stuck on it, it’s pretty much like pouring a fine sauce on a gourmet cut of meat to accentuate it. It’s a big invitation that screams, ‘Eat me, please!’”

The shocking statement made Rosemarie open and close her mouth wordlessly. She had never heard of such a thing, either in her home country or in the time since she’d left.

“You were *lured* into the forest by the Silver Lion, m’girl. A mere child without mana wouldn’t last for a second. You’d be pushin’ up daisies if Princey here hadn’t come looking for you.” Lene shot her a pitiful look. Rosemarie unwittingly clutched Claudio’s arms as they supported her, and he reciprocated the hold.

“And that’s why the Hippocampus was so insistent on calling Rosemarie, too... I always knew there was no way a child could enter the Forbidden Forest all on their own. I see... So, Mage Lene, you knew that Kaola and the Seed of Mana-Sealing were the same and made me consume it?”

Claudio’s questioning expression sparked Rosemarie’s memory. She remembered Lene was present when they made Claudio drink the Seed of Mana-Sealing.

Lene knitted his brows. “Uh, whuh? Don’t have the foggiest, lad. They were the *same*? I didn’t smell any Kaola from the Seed of Mana-Sealing. That thing was pretty old, y’know. In fact, it was so old, all the smell had come off it... Ah-ha, I see now. That’s why drinking the Seed of Mana-Sealing was reserved as a punishment for sorcerers who committed serious crimes, eh?” Lene looked up for a bit, spinning his gears while scratching his head, before returning his gaze to Rosemarie.

“With your mana being sealed off and pumping out the smell of Kaola, you’re a nice walking victim for Sacred Beasts. I’m going to venture that your mana being so big that it couldn’t be completely sealed was the reason you were never eaten up, Princey.”

Claudio put his hand on his stomach. His expression in profile was a veritable bag of mixed emotions.

Rosemarie stared at him in concern, but suddenly moved her attention to Lene.

“Mage Lene, does this mean that I cannot return Prince Claudio’s mana to him because I’m using it to compensate for the cracks in my soul? I mean, I’m able to return it to him from time to time just like this time, but I want to be sure...”

“Yeah, that’s the thing. Honestly, I don’t even know why you *can* return it from time to time. Even though I’m guessing you wanted to ask me ’bout it since Edel doesn’t know, either.” Lene shot Edeltraud a perplexed look, which the Archmagus answered with an equally perplexed tilt of the head.

“Yeah. That’s right. Get that Seed of Mana-Sealing disappeared because absorbed returned mana. But don’t know conditions for Volland Princess to return mana. By the way, still haven’t asked how it returned this time around. Explain?” Edeltraud’s sleepy-looking eyes were brimming with a light of interest. Rosemarie instantly turned red, released the arm she had unconsciously taken hold of, and took a step back.

“Um, well, you see... I... *ad... resp...* on him.”

“Huh? What? Repeat again. Speak up.”

“She said she *administered artificial respiration on me.*” Claudio grabbed Edeltraud by the scruff of their neck as they drew closer to Rosemarie, who answered their question as if it were no big deal. His cheeks were slightly pink, regardless.

Rosemarie looked away from him and hung her head. Although that was a matter of desperate times calling for desperate measures, in retrospect, that was the longest they had ever locked lips. Rosemarie wished her bucket was nearby so she could hide her head beneath it.

Observing all of this, Lene started scratching at his arm. “Aaah, seeing the two of you with the naive, young love-esque reactions are making me itch! You’re supposed to be man and wife! Act like it!”

“Master Lene, this isn’t the worst of it.”

“Hm? It gets *worse*? Boy, I tell ya... I gotta tip my hat to you all for dealing with ’im,” said Lene with a wry chuckle. Rosemarie covered her face with both hands out of embarrassment. She knew that he would mention that, but if it was something she could help, she would have done it already. She wished that she could handle her fits a little better.

Claudio cleared his throat to reset the situation. “Enough. Drop the matter and let’s get back on track. So, if Rosemarie got the pieces of her soul back from the Silver Lion, then both my mana and my face would return to normal permanently?” Rosemarie felt the heat that

rose to her face die down and she clasped her hands.

He mentioned repairing her soul. Was that possibility even on the table?

As she stared at Lene inquisitively, the former guard of the Forbidden Forest made a face as tranquil as when he was “Bishop Lancel.”

“Right, well... It’s not gonna be easy by any stretch. As for your face, it’s hard to tell. Given everything I’ve heard till now, I’m guessing that’s a curse from the Silver Lion. All because you stole away its prey—our princess here.”

The word “curse” sent shivers down Rosemarie’s spine. It almost seemed as though she could hear the neighing of the Hippocampus. She shook her head.

“Well, fortunately, the Seed of Mana-Sealing seems to have settled down, and if you plan on keeping married to the princess here, then you can live a comfortable life even without getting your mana back, I figure. So, personally, I think you don’t *need* to *force* your way into getting it back,” Lene advised Rosemarie and Claudio, telling them to take it as the wisdom of an elder. The two of them could do nothing but nod in reply, bewildered.

Epilogue

The carriage subtly rocked as it rolled along its way.

As she basked in the comfortable rocking, Rosemarie peered out at the scenery going past the window. The beautiful coastline commanded a view from the carriage as it drove along the coastal road, a sight that Rosemarie never grew tired of.

(Time really did fly by.)

Their stay in the Holy Land lasted about seven days, but so many things transpired that it felt like it all happened in the blink of an eye. Sitting in the carriage heading back to Baltzar, she finally felt as though she could catch her breath.

The bucket she asked for Heidi to return sat in her lap as she cast her eyes on Claudio, who was sitting across from her.

Claudio was also enjoying the view out the window in similar fashion to Rosemarie. And the face reflected back at him in the glass wasn't a lion's, either; it was the same human head she saw with her own eyes. But it was probably going to right back to looking like a lion's in a few days.

Claudio's expression as he peered outside was hard to read—there was no telling what was on his mind. Ever since their discussion with Lene, they had been extremely scant with words.

(I suppose it's only natural. He was told that he would live even without his mana, after all.) But, as one required mana to hold the position of crown prince, that was as good as telling him to step down. It was a statement that was enough to shatter Claudio's efforts up until then.

Without a clue as to how she should initiate a conversation with him, she ended up keeping silent.

(I really wish I could say *something* clever to break the ice...)

She didn't notice any symptoms like pain or discomfort in regards to her soul being fractured—a fact that made her less concerned about herself and more concerned for Claudio.

The carriage drove over a particularly big bump, rocking it more so than usual.

“Rosemarie.”

“Yes! I mean, y-yes? Would you like to put your head in my lap?” She wasn't ready for him to address her and blurted out a nonsensical offer—one so nonsensical that it made Claudio tense his face up

before responding with a wry smile.

“—Yes. That doesn’t sound half bad.”

His compliance drew the color from Rosemarie’s face. Claudio would normally refuse her proposal, but he nodded and agreed to it instead. He was probably considerably depressed, so she couldn’t let herself panic.

“Oh, um, err, it’s okay! I’ll follow you anywhere if you so decide, Prince Claudio.” Rosemarie made her appeal while leaning forward. Maybe he thought that her words were hackneyed and cliché, but it was an earnest statement.

Claudio looked at her dubiously, likely out of surprise, but soon started smiling.

“You’re thinking that I’m going to give up the position of crown prince, right?”

“Huh? Is that not correct? Well, since you said you’d lay your head upon my lap, I was convinced that you decided to give your position up and fell into despair...”

“And who said *that*? No way would I so easily abandon everything that I’ve built up. I have the expectations of others to consider, as well. Even if things prove difficult, if I can retrieve my mana, then I will struggle forward no matter what,” Claudio stated with a dauntless smile, his usual firm attitude in place.

“Plus, we have to fix your eyes.”

“In that case, why...” She stared at Claudio in confusion, making him lose whatever words he had. He then averted his eyes awkwardly.

“I’ve also put your through quite the harrowing set of experiences and I’m sure there’s much of the same to follow in the future. You may not want to go to Baltzar. But, as I’ve stated several times before, I do not want to send you back, nor do I have any plans to send you back.”

No desire to send her back and no plans on it, either—she had heard him say those words time and time again, yet they made her chest tighten up all the same. She had realized that, despite him being so very sincere with her, she still had not given him a concrete answer.

“... I thought that if I granted your wishes, then you wouldn’t ask to go back to Volland even after my mana went back to normal.” Claudio poured out his heart and, while he didn’t look at Rosemarie, there were no signs of him being bashful. As she wondered just how close to his wits’ end he was, she felt herself getting uncontrollably flustered.

“... Surely you haven’t been so short of words because that has been on your mind this entire time... right?”

The thought seemed ridiculous, but it still hung in the back of her

head. She stared intently at Claudio and he not only turned his eyes, but his entire head, away from her gaze. His ears were gradually turning red.

“Well, *excuse me* for giving it thought,” said Claudio sulkily, which made Rosemarie pull on his sleeve.

“Um, but if you need me... I will stay by your side.” The last time she’d said that, he said that the sentiment pleased him; but Claudio seemed far from pleased as he continued to look out the window.

“... I’ve become a greedy man. I want those words to be enough to satisfy me, but a prejudiced part of me thinks that you’re just saying that since you feel obligated to me.”

“—It’s not out of any obligation, though.” Rosemarie shook her head, befuddled. She’d never expected that he would be under that impression.

“—Prince Claudio, I married you because your head never appeared as a beast head to me.”

“Yes, that’s right. And I took you as my wife because I wanted to retrieve the mana you stole from me.”

“Right, that is why I planned on giving my role as crown princess to someone more befitting and returning to Volland once I returned your mana.” Rosemarie squeezed the bucket that sat on her lap and dropped her gaze.

“I did, at least. But then I saw Princess Suzette by your side and I didn’t want to go back to Volland or give up my position—even if it meant that you would hate me because of it. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe how it just wasn’t like me—it frightened me, in fact.”

Feeling Claudio’s eyes cast firmly upon her, Rosemarie lifted her head. Claudio had been looking at the window the entire time, but now his eyes were focused on her, looking slightly surprised.

“I think that the only person I’ll ever have feelings for like this is you, Prince Claudio.” Never before did she ever think that she would feel this way by the time she got to know Claudio’s true character. It caused her some discomfort and fear, yet it also brought her happiness.

“Prince Claudio, you make me... Huh?” Just as Rosemarie was about to finish her sentence, a sound hit her ears and made her stop partway. It was a beautiful sound; a rustle of something light yet solid, making a jingling of sorts.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, um, There’s just this peculiar sound...”

“Sound? Oh... right.” Claudio’s face snapped directly from a perplexed stare to a disappointed scowl.

“What utterly lousy timing,” he uttered under his breath in dissatisfaction at the same time the carriage stopped in its steady

tracks.

“Your Highness! We have arrived at your requested location!”

“Yes, appreciated.” Claudio responded to Alto’s call with a thanks before opening the door.

“Prince Claudio, where are you...?”

“I’m going to show you what you’ve been wanting to see. Come along.”

Rosemarie cocked her head in confusion at Claudio and his mischievous smile, but left the carriage, regardless. Once she set foot on the ground, she went to Claudio’s side, just as she had a few days prior when they took a break on the hill overlooking the Holy Land. He put her shawl over her shoulders.

“Why did we stop here?”

“Oh, it is a surprise, milady,” said Heidi with a suggestive smile.

“You know, your husband can be so shrewd that it’s scary,” said the person standing beside Heidi with a deep sigh—that person was the pigtailed chambermaid, Adelina. Adelina had borne witness to everything, so leaving her behind in the Holy Land wasn’t an option. That was why they decided to take her with them—especially considering she was originally from Baltzar.

Rosemarie pondered those statements as she saw Claudio beckon for her on the other side of the carriage.

“What in the world could it be...? Huh? But, this is...”

Covering the beach like a blanket, flowers with transparent petals tinged with blue were in bloom. The petals were similar to violets’, and every time they waved in the sea breeze, a comforting jingling noise resounded.

“You wanted to see these before we left for the Holy Land, right? You said that they only bloom near beaches.”

“Yes, that is true, but that was such a small mention...” She never would have thought he would remember something like that.

“We were on the way, anyway. And so much has happened this time around. Consider it my treat to you.”

There was no way this was on the way. If they passed by here on the way to the Holy Land, she would have realized based on this sound alone, even if the curtains were down in the carriage. He went out of his way to bring her out here.

Rosemarie squatted and touched the petals as she listened to Claudio’s tender voice. They proved to be far more delicate than expected, so she pulled her hand away quickly to avoid crushing them.

“Prince Claudio, this is not fair. If you do things like this, it will make me fall deeper in...” She bit her lip and quickly stood up. Then, she turned herself around and tugged on Claudio’s ears. He staggered

a bit, the look of satisfaction disappearing from his face.

“—Even *if* you do things like this, I love you.”

As soon as she whispered those words into his ear, he took it back and blushed a sudden, bright red. It was just as she'd suspected: when she initiated, Claudio was on the back foot.

“Y-You... What do you think you're...?!” Claudio shouted with a beet-red face as something suddenly latched onto it.

“Momo!”

The squirrel with the flower emblem on its forehead stuck itself to Claudio's face, just as it had a few days prior. Rosemarie rushed to pull it off, but the squirrel was easily removed this time and ran up Rosemarie's arm to her shoulder.

It was strange to see it there, considering they had released it back into the forest on the hill overlooking the Holy Land.

“We took that squirrel back to the forest. What is it doing here? We've got no more Kaola.” Claudio rubbed at his face from the possible scratch he suffered, glaring in an annoyed manner at the squirrel. The squirrel then squeaked, threatened, wagging its body left and right.



“You are angry, so I believe it’s feeling threatened.”

“No, that isn’t it. It doesn’t like the fact that I’m coming close to you.”

“...Prince Claudio, I implore you not to be jealous over a mere *squirrel*.”

“It may be a squirrel, but it’s a Sacred Beast, I’ll have you know.”

Claudio’s brows drooped, and he turned away to hide his awkward expression.

“And, please, don’t sulk.”

“I’m *not* sulking.” Claudio obstinately refuted, a gesture Rosemarie considered just a bit charming as she gently tugged on his sleeve in consolation and gave him a smile.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up this book out of the thousands of other books out there. It's me, Eri Shiduki.

This makes the second volume of the tale of a shut-in princess and a beast-headed prince! Seeing as how this is my first sequel, I've been quite nervous and anxious about it. So much so that it's been showing up in my dreams...

I've tried to make things more cute and fluffy this time around. Not counting the animals that are usually scattered around to Rosemarie's eyes, of course...

Oh, by the way, this is a bit of a behind the scenes thing, but I'm going to let you in on something that I wasn't able to put in. Ilse's bird head was actually a shoebill in my mind. It's a monstrous bird that stands still like a statue. My line of thinking was that it'd be pretty darn scary if someone with a head like that came stalking after you.

The scary stuff aside, Kasumi-sensei is back again to provide her wonderful art for the sequel! Looking at the cover makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. The flying squirrel on it is so cute.

I would also like to extend my thanks to all the people who made this possible, including my supervisor who provided so much help to me over the course of writing this novel.

Finally, I would like to give my thanks to you, the reader. I was only able to produce a sequel thanks to readers like you.

Here is hoping that I get to see you all again in whatever the future may hold.

Eri Shiduki





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Apparently it's My Fault That My Husband Has The Head of a
Beast: Volume 2

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